

DUNE: SPICE WARS **FIRST LOOK PREVIEW**

PC GAMER[®]

STEAM DECK



EXPERT REVIEW

→ Can it run the biggest games?

→ Could it replace your PC?

→ Is it a must-buy?



HAMMER TIME

WH40K: CHAOS GATE

**XCOM-LIKE STRATEGY
MEETS WARHAMMER**

REVIEWED

**TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III
DYING LIGHT 2 / LOST ARK
RAINBOW SIX: EXTRACTION**



ISSUE 368



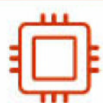
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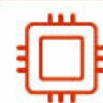
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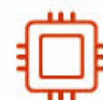
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“VALVE HAS CRATED A FASCINATING PIECE OF HARDWARE”



As soon as we got a Steam Deck in the office, it was all anyone could talk about. As we crowded around, each taking our turn to put it through its paces, it was immediately obvious we were in possession of something special. Will it change the face of PC gaming? That's hard to predict. But what we can certainly say is that Valve has created a fascinating piece of

hardware – and we couldn't wait to share our experiences with it with you.

Our huge feature was even partly written on the Steam Deck itself. How's that for really committing to a story?

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

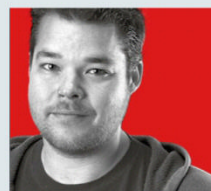
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The PC Gamer team



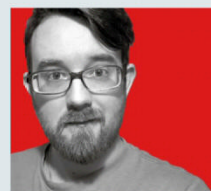
WES FENLON
Twitter
[@wesleyfenlon](https://twitter.com/wesleyfenlon)

This month
Played the Steam Deck until his arms got tired. Which, er, happened quite quickly. It's heavy, guys.



DAVE JAMES
Twitter
[@Not_the_GK](https://twitter.com/Not_the_GK)

This month
Played the Steam Deck, did work on the Steam Deck, alienated his family with the Steam Deck...



FRASER BROWN
Twitter
[@FraserIBrown](https://twitter.com/FraserIBrown)

This month
Indulged in his two passions: Warhammer Fantasy and Warhammer 40,000.



IMOGEN MELLOR
Twitter
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This month
Our newest member was happy to discover the year's least scary horror game.

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STEAM DECK

Two of our experts put the Steam Deck through its paces to discover what it can do, what it can't do, and whether it could replace your gaming PC.

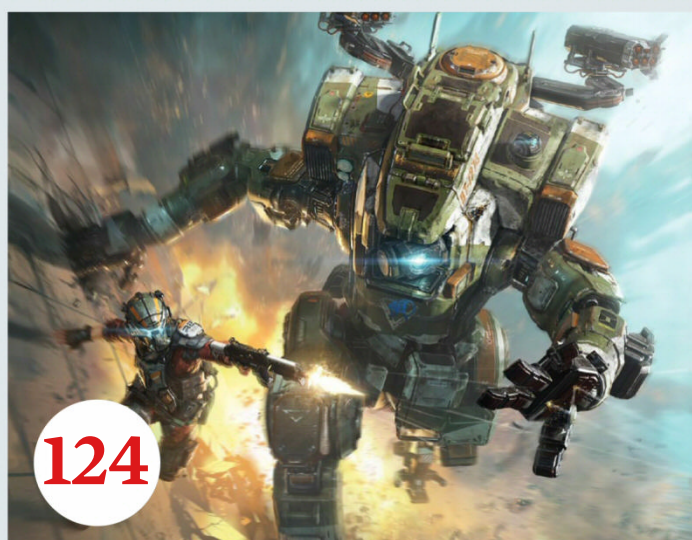
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Say hello to new hire Imogen!

MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



BIG GAME HUNTING

Microsoft's proposed acquisition of **ACTIVISION BLIZZARD** is the biggest deal in games history

Before 2022 had even really begun, Microsoft shocked the games industry by announcing it would acquire Activision Blizzard for \$68.7 billion. The scale of the buyout is staggering and will give Microsoft control of some of the biggest game series around, including *Call of Duty* and *Overwatch*, and overnight make it the third-largest game company in the world by revenue.

It's not a done deal, and the US Federal Trade Commission will be investigating, but the general consensus among business and legal

ABOVE: ActiBlizzard has some big games in the works, including *Diablo IV* and *Overwatch 2* – though both of those still seem to be a long way off release.

specialists is that it will go through. Microsoft has said that it expects to complete the takeover by July 2023.

The deal raised questions about Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick, who has recently faced strong criticism accusing the company of ignoring or mishandling allegations of workplace harassment. There have

**THE DEAL RAISED
QUESTIONS ABOUT
ACTIVISION BLIZZARD
CEO BOBBY KOTICK**

been calls for Kotick's resignation from various quarters, but for the moment he remains in position: reports say the plan is for him to step down once the deal is closed.

MONOPOLY MONEY

It wasn't so long ago that Microsoft's involvement in gaming was in question. But when Satya Nadella took over as Microsoft CEO in 2014, it made a bold statement of intent – acquiring *Minecraft* – before changing course, moving away from trying to sell consoles – though for now, of course, it still does – and towards selling subscriptions across as much hardware as possible.

GRAND THEFT AUTO VI

DRIVING FORCE



Although it's been an easy bet that *Grand Theft Auto VI* was in the works, only recently has Rockstar confirmed a new entry in the series. *GTA V* has sold a breathtaking 160 million copies in its eight years, which is more than all the *Assassin's Creeds* combined. We're auto-matically excited. ■ **IM**

SCUSI?

SENATE, MEET RULE 34



A meeting of the Italian senate in January, where academics were giving advice to politicians, was interrupted by a very NSFW video feed of *FFVII*'s Tifa Lockheart and an unknown gentleman. The feed was cut, but not before dignitaries, including a Nobel prize winner, saw quite the sight. ■ **MT**

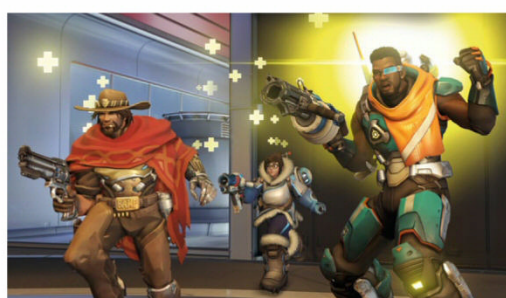
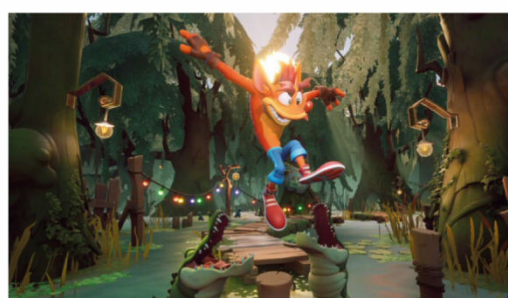
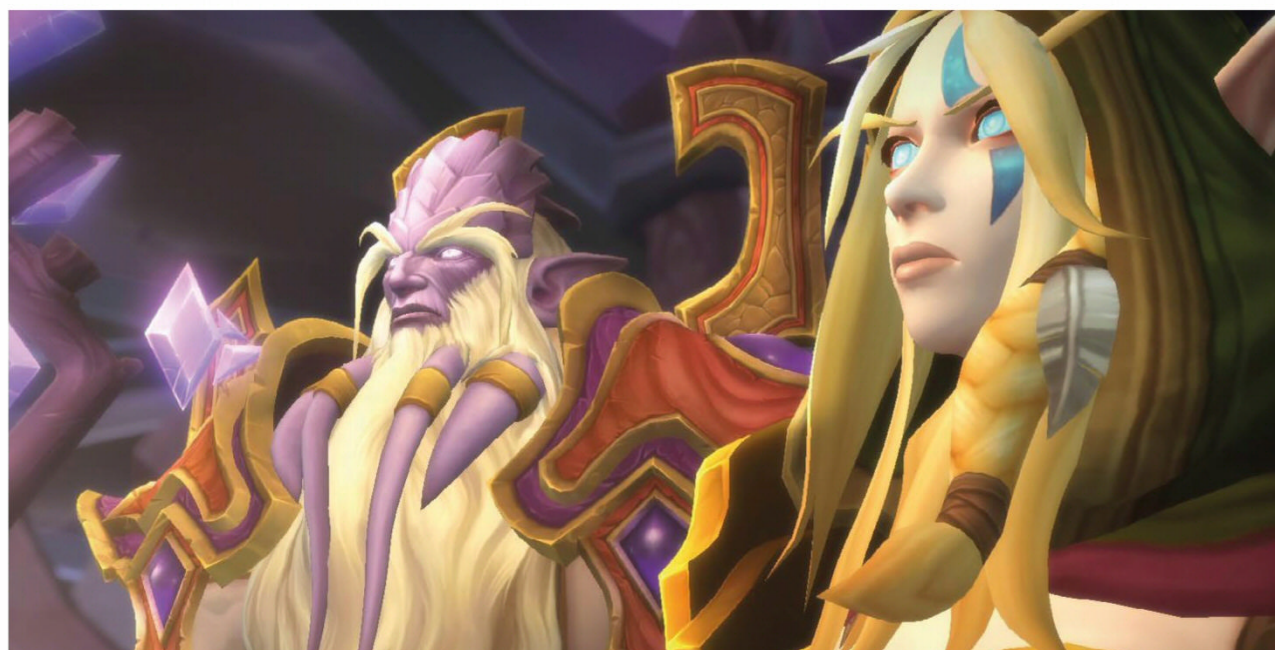


INTO THE ETHER

CRYPTO KEEPERS



Why go to the effort of robbing a bank when you can tweak some code and walk away with over \$300M in crypto? Last week a hacker turned cryptocurrency platform Wormhole's systems against it, transferring 120,000 WETH to the their own wallet and leaving Wormhole to foot the bill. ■ **JR**



TOP: The Blizzard side of the business in particular has been the focus of reports in recent years alleging toxic workplace culture and struggling projects.

ABOVE: Yes, Microsoft now own *Crash Bandicoot*. We live in interesting times.

This is why Microsoft has, in recent years particularly, been keen to use those deep pockets, and is now almost unrecognisable from a decade ago. In 2018 it acquired Ninja Theory, Playground Games, Undead Labs, Compulsion Games, Obsidian Entertainment, and inXile Entertainment. In 2019 it added Double Fine, before 2020 saw the \$7.5 billion blockbuster deal for Zenimax and Bethesda, which included studios like id and Arkane.

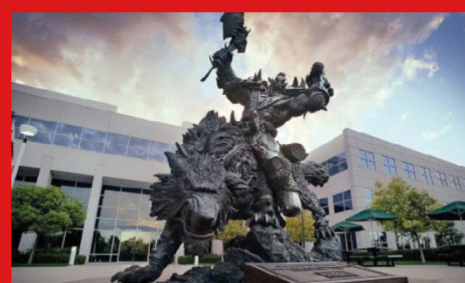
As if the Activision Blizzard news wasn't enough excitement, it was swiftly followed by the announcement that Sony had acquired *Destiny* developer Bungie for \$3.6 billion. Inevitably this was seen as some sort of exchange in the platform wars: but the scale of Microsoft's acquisition shows those are a thing of the past.

In the short term, this deal will make little difference to players. A few years down the line, however, the impact of all of this first-party strength will begin to come through in Game Pass. That might be great, and Microsoft will for now balance going all-in on Game Pass and keeping stuff available elsewhere.

Microsoft isn't Microsoft because it plays nice. It's always been there but now aims to make itself absolutely central to PC gaming's future. Unignorable. Soon enough, with the stroke of a pen, it will be.

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Announcement storm

Blizzard's announced two new 'unannounced' projects (don't ask).

ARM & a leg

Nvidia is no longer buying Arm from SoftBank, following resistance to its proposed \$40 billion takeover.

Resi 4 HD HD

A *Resident Evil 4 HD* fan mod that was eight years in the making has finally been released.

Hero to Zero

Guitar Hero record-setter Schmooney admitted he's a fake following heroic internet detective work.

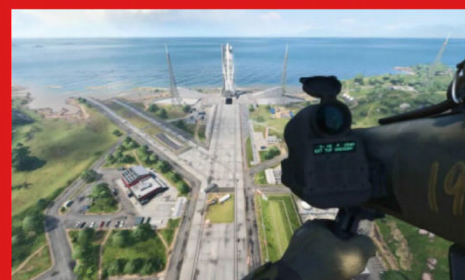
MineScam

One of the latest NFT rug-pulls involved *Blockverse*. It raised over \$1 million: then disappeared...

Battlefailed 2042

EA is down on *Battlefield 2042* and developer DICE has gone into salvage mode on a game that feels like it didn't launch in a good state.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Something weird has happened with The Spy's trusty sidekick, Predictabot-5000, the loveable scamp who makes videogame predictions. The fan favourite robot – beloved by many a reader thanks to his frequent appearances on this page – has always maintained that, in the year 2843, humanity will be enslaved by a networked AI that has seeded itself through all matter using nanofungal spores. *That's Predictabot!*

Recently, though, something has changed in the prediction matrix. Predictabot now tells us that the AI overlord will be bought out and decommissioned in a huge merger slated for 2820, thus securing the future of FLESH, the last publicly traded company, of which all humanity is both shareholder and employee. When The Spy tried to uncover more details of what this means, or even what the company actually makes, Predictabot just kept printing out the word FLESH with increased volume and urgency. *That's, er, Predictabot?!*

Let us instead turn to the more immediate future, which is presumably free from ominous portents of doom. Geoff Keighley's Twitter account seems like a safe place to start.

As you may have noticed, the games industry is keen to shake itself up this year. Already two major acquisitions have been announced. First Microsoft bought Activision,

which is a pretty big deal, both philosophically and financially. Then Sony bought Bungie, which is a much smaller deal to everyone except the handful of PC Gamer writers still grinding *Destiny 2*'s Grandmaster Nightfalls for a god roll Palindrome.

"Have heard from multiple people," wrote Keighley the day after the Bungie acquisition was announced. "As you might suspect, there are a few other big videogame deals in final stages of negotiations. It's going to be an interesting year!"

Keighley, who you may know from The Game Awards and his tweets about Hideo Kojima, then offered his thoughts on whether such acquisitions are good for gaming, "I'm on the fence." Thanks, Geoff!

BIG SPENDERS

On the one hand it's not a difficult prediction to make: eventually, someone is going to buy something. But The Spy wouldn't be surprised to see such acquisitions become a trend of 2022. A lot of people are judging Microsoft and Sony's moves in terms of the console war, but The Spy – who is hip and current – can't help but feel like that's an old fashioned idea. Do you spend \$68.7 billion to make your £450 plastic box the most desirable? Or do you do it to corner the subscription market for all of gaming, on all devices.

Late last year, Bloomberg reported that Sony was working on a competitor to Xbox's Game Pass – codenamed Spartacus. This makes sense, because subscription services are the future: they can potentially exist on all platforms, but still operate on an ecosystem that their company controls. And hey, Game Pass is a good deal, and so this *could* be good news, especially here on PC – the most open of platforms. But it's worth remembering that the endgame of any such service is to create a monopoly so complete that you're free to turn it into total dogshit without repercussion. Just ask Spotify.

Weird, when The Spy finished typing that last paragraph, smoke started pouring out of Predictabot's chassis. Fingers crossed that doesn't mean anything. Spy out. ■

The Spy

**THE SPY WOULDN'T
BE SURPRISED TO SEE
SUCH ACQUISITIONS
BECOME A TREND**



THE SPY

Bought out all the other spies for a monopoly on PC gaming espionage.

This month in... 2012



1 Ten years on from our cover feature, *Guild Wars 2* remains one of the best MMOs for people who like the idea of *World of Warcraft*, but don't actually like *World of Warcraft*. And while it'll never get the attention of *WoW* or *Final Fantasy XIV*, it remains active – even among a handful of PCG's staff.

ISSUE
238, April 2012
ON THE COVER
Guild Wars 2
IN THE CINEMAS
21 Jump Street



2 Lurking in the back half of our reviews section, *Crusader Kings II* gets just two pages. We didn't know it would get so huge, but we did know it was 87% good.

3 We round up every major MMO on PC. As always, these features are a fascinating list of games you half remember. But the real surprise is how many still exist – albeit now in a free-to-play form. Like, yeah, it turns out that *Rift* is still going. Who knew?! Increasingly MMOs seem to be regaining popularity, so it would be interesting to remake this list today.



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Special Report

INVESTIGATES



How closely will
Redfall resemble its
2021 reveal trailer?

UNREAL TOUR

What to expect from games running on **UNREAL ENGINE 5**'s 'next-gen' technology

Once or twice a decade we get one of my favourite treats: a new game engine tech demo. These are not actual games. They're better: they're promises of what games could be, pure spectacle showcases for the majesty of a million more polygons on screen and bumpy tessellated surfaces and lifelike ray-traced lighting. Tech demos are raw power and unhinged artistry mashed together, gleefully disregarding pesky problems like 'writing' and 'design' that have to go into proper videogames.

Maybe the best of them was 2011's Unreal Engine 3 Samaritan demo, a three minute slice of gritty sci-fi (still more evocative today than playing *Cyberpunk 2077* in 2021 turned out to be). In 2005 Square Enix created a tech demo of *Final Fantasy VII* for the PlayStation 3 that ended up haunting the company for years until it finally bowed to inevitability and announced the *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. Then there was 2020's ridiculously pretty Unreal Engine 5 unveiling, which was all the more impressive because it included developers talking about how it all works. Using UE5's new "virtualised geometry" technology "artists wouldn't have to be concerned over polycounts, draw calls, or memory", Epic technical director of graphics Brian Karis said in

the demo. "They could directly use film-quality assets and bring them into the engine."

UNREAL WORLD

Usually part of the bargain with a tech demo is that deep down we know it's all smoke and mirrors, but Epic said that 2020's Unreal Engine 5 reveal ran in real time on a PlayStation 5. Could a playable game actually live up to that promise? December's *The Matrix Awakens* demo felt like a pointed answer to that question: even though it's only available on consoles, it's a genuinely mind-blowing representation of how realistic UE5 games can look, blending together UE5's new virtualised geometry, global illumination lighting, and Epic's uncanny MetaHuman creation tool.

We're going to see all of these come into play in the next generation of big-budget games. But when, exactly? That's hard to say: game developers are hesitant to pin down release dates too far out during the best of times, and the pandemic has caused some major delays.

There's a chance that the first new Unreal Engine 5 game we play will be *Redfall*, Arkane's co-op shooter. It's supposedly still due in the summer of 2022, with an open world set in the town of Redfall, Massachusetts, that's inconveniently overrun by vampires. Or conveniently, I guess, since a vampire horde gives us



Unreal legacy

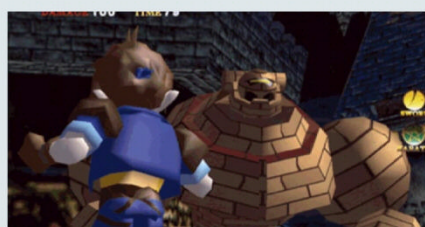
The very first version of Epic's Unreal Engine was developed for 1998 FPS *Unreal*, which spawned multiplayer spin-off *Unreal Tournament*. 2006's Unreal Engine 3 debuted with *Gears of War* and became the most successful iteration of the engine. UE3 was still being used (and heavily customised) in high profile games as recently as 2019's *Mortal Kombat 11*.



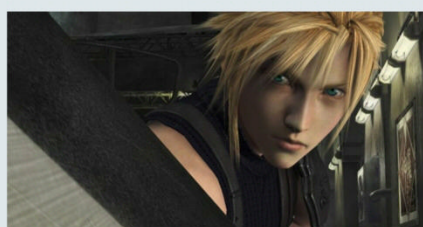
FAR LEFT: Will *STALKER 2* be able to compete with *Metro Exodus*' level of detail?

LEFT: *Black Myth: Wukong*, possibly out in 2023, stars the shapeshifting Monkey King. Read *Journey to the West* for a jumpstart.

DEMO SCENES *Four memorable tech demos across 25 years*



FINAL FANTASY VI: THE INTERACTIVE CG GAME 1995
This Silicon Graphics demo seemed like a precursor to a Nintendo 64 *Final Fantasy*.



FINAL FANTASY VII TECHNICAL DEMO 2005
Square recreated *FFVII*'s opening to show off what the PS3 would be capable of.



UNREAL ENGINE 3: SAMARITAN 2011
Epic made *Samaritan* to show the power of new DirectX 11 tech.



THE MATRIX AWAKENS 2021
This staggeringly detailed city environment shows off the potential of UE5's Nanite geometry system.

something to shoot and means much of the game will likely be set at night, giving UE5's lighting tech Lumen a chance to shine. But that's just guesswork: all we've seen of *Redfall* so far is a lengthy cutscene.

STALKER 2 nearly had the honour of being the first major Unreal Engine 5 game released in 2022, but it was delayed from the spring to December. *STALKER 2* may be a good showcase for Nanite, that "virtualised geometry" system that allows artists to import extremely detailed models into the game world without slowing it to a crawl. GSC Game World showed off a character model in early 2021, complete with visible "scuffs, scratches, and sticking-out threads", as described by GSC Game World's Zakahr Bocharov. *STALKER*'s developers even built a "teeth tool" to give every ugly mug a unique smile.

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice was stunning back in 2017, and since then developer Ninja Theory has leaned even harder into the HUD-free, filmic approach to game design for the sequel *Senua's Saga: Hellblade 2*. Ninja Theory is using photogrammetry in Iceland to capture the landscape and creating, then scanning, real physical costumes to create the digital ones in the game. Senua's facial animations in the first game were created in partnership with a pair of companies called 3Lateral and Cubic Motion, which have both been acquired by Epic and brought together to work on the Metahuman tool. You can bet that tool will play a big role in bringing *Senua's Saga*'s humans to life. When Microsoft showed the game off at December's Game Awards, it still had no set release date.

DON'T MYTH

No game made a bigger out-of-nowhere splash in 2020 than *Black Myth: Wukong*, an adventure game based on *Journey to the West* in development by Chinese studio Game Science. *Black Myth*'s debut trailer looked incredible but was actually running on Unreal Engine 4 at the time; in 2021 the developers upgraded to Unreal Engine 5, a process they described as "unexpectedly smooth" in an interview on the Unreal blog.

"Nanite significantly reduces the difficulty of

performance optimization for environments," said tech director and studio co-founder Zhao Wenyong.

"And with the help of Lumen, we no longer need to bake the lightmaps or use point lights to fake global illumination." Game Science doesn't expect to finish *Black Myth* until 2023, yet we've seen more of it than any other Unreal 5 game so far. There are

more games confirmed to be underway with UE5, but with few details. Korean MMOs *ArcheAge 2* and *Legend of Ymir* are years away, and Square Enix is developing *Dragon Quest XII* on Unreal, but has only revealed a logo.

Unreal Engine 5 has spent the last year available to a limited pool of developers in Early Access. According to Epic, it's finally going to be available to everyone this spring. But the games above are almost certainly not everything in development on the engine right now. The next time we see Vin Diesel fever dream *Ark 2*, *Dead Space* successor *The Callisto Protocol*, or *Mass Effect 5*, they'll likely be showing off Epic's next-gen engine, too. ■

Wes Fenlon

**THERE'S A CHANCE
THAT THE FIRST NEW
UE5 GAME WE PLAY
WILL BE REDFALL**

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

BEYOND BIOSHOCK

Gone Home developer **JOHNNEMANN NORDHAGEN**'s career on the edge

One of the tensions throughout my career is that the stuff I want to be making is on the edges of commercial viability," says Johnnemann Nordhagen. "They're the sort of thing that, if you get the right niche interested in them, they may pay for themselves – but they're never going to make a billion dollars."

It's not as lonely a position as you might think. Nordhagen spent a formative part of his career at *Bioshock 2* developer 2K Marin, surrounded by people who loved immersive sims like *Thief* and *Deus Ex*. It's a genre that has always teetered on the boundary of commercial viability – requiring big budgets, but rarely pulling in large audiences. At times, it's been considered indulgent – a genre more to the tastes of game designers than players.

"Most people were there because they were excited about games being something more interesting," says Nordhagen. "I feel a little silly about this, but when *Bioshock* came out, it felt like someone taking art game concepts and putting them into a commercial product. Someone was making a philosophical statement, and also you could shoot guys. It was a revelation in some ways."

Nordhagen had leveraged his expertise as part of Sony's research and development department to get onto 2K Marin's first project: porting *Bioshock* to the PS3. Following that, he worked on the sequel's interface and AI programming, and became an integral member of the team that produced its acclaimed DLC. To make *Minerva's Den*, a small group within 2K Marin leaned into *Bioshock*'s focus on surprising narrative payoffs, telling the story of a supercomputer and its creator.

"It told all of us on that team it was possible," says Nordhagen. "We could tell a really compelling story without many resources. It was the thing that gave us the confidence to make *Gone Home*."

Released independently by just a handful of developers and leaning heavily on their experience with *Bioshock*, *Gone Home* posited that the archeological storytelling of immersive sims could carry an entire game. "The idea of, 'Let's take this immersive sim thing, take out the combat and just tell a story with it. Is this interesting?' Turns out it was," says Nordhagen.

HOME RUN

Gone Home proved a pivotal game for indie development, and for the genre now referred to as the 'walking simulator' – sometimes derogatively, sometimes not. Afterwards, Nordhagen drifted further towards the edge of commercial viability, moving back to San Francisco and dedicating four years to *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* – a game about sharing stories on the road in Depression-era America. In some ways, it was a reaction against his experience with immersive sims, which tended to tell just one story – that of an auteur writer-director.

"I became conscious of the similarity of stories in games like *Bioshock*," says Nordhagen. "These games give a lot of power to the player, but only tell the same kind of story. The idea arose of, 'Why don't I make this game a platform to let other people tell their stories? I will build the stage and let them do their performances on it.'"

Where the Water Tastes Like Wine became an anthology-style showcase of writers from diverse backgrounds reflecting the "patchwork of experiences that is America". "I was never at all unhappy with that choice," says Nordhagen. "It was the right thing for sure."

Today, Nordhagen is still straddling that boundary between art games and the AAA industry. On the one hand, he's moving to Stockholm to start a job at Ubisoft, working as a technical narrative designer. On the other, he's releasing *Museum of Mechanics* on Steam – an exhibition of the different ways videogames have approached lockpicking. "It is meant for a very, very small audience of people who like doing deep dives on game mechanics and wandering around a space without much challenge or narrative in order to have an experience," he says.

Lockpicking, of course, is a mechanic beloved by immersive sims. Evidently, some intrinsic part of Nordhagen still holds a candle for them: those would-be art games that forever flirt with the mainstream. ■

Jeremy Peel

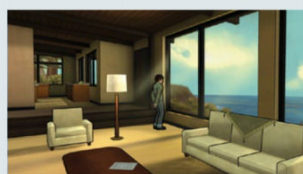
2K MARIN-ATION

Other great indie games from the *Bioshock 2* team



ELDRITCH

A roguelike from David Pittman, this leans on the same form of first-person stealth that powers many immersive sims.



THE NOVELIST

Kent Hudson used *Dishonored*-style teleportation to cast you as a ghost, flitting between the light fittings of a family home.



THE BLACKOUT CLUB

Jordan Thomas directed *Bioshock 2* before working on this creepy co-op horror game that crossed *Thief* with *Stranger Things*.



THE ARCHEOLOGICAL STORYTELLING OF IMMERSIVE SIMS COULD CARRY AN ENTIRE GAME



FAR LEFT: *Minerva's Den* was mainly a narrative experience. Despite appearances.

LEFT: *Gone Home* switched *Rapture* for something more terrifying: teenage hormones.

DNA Tracing

[[GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPL

THE GETAWAY IS THAT
RARE GAME
ENHANCED BY ITS
PRODUCT PLACEMENT

THE LONG GOODBYE

How **TEAM BONDI** built *LA Noire* on the back of *The Getaway*

Look at the paper map of London folded into the front of *The Getaway*'s DVD box, and you'll be struck by two things. First, just how incredibly faithful it is. And second, the uneven street density. Where most of the city is a condensed network of main roads that take you round the back of Buckingham Palace and across Hyde Park, that changes as you cruise through Covent Garden into Soho – the game world becoming a close crosshatch of squares and side streets. It's the natural focus of a team that lived and worked in the area – Team Soho, as they were then. The same core staff that would end up founding Team Bondi, and making *LA Noire*.

The Getaway has a lot in common with the game Team Soho's key members would go on to create. For one thing, it took a long time to come together – first conceptualised during the PS1 era, and releasing just after *Vice City*. Unusually for the time, it shone a spotlight on its non-celebrity actors – using photo images of the cast in promotion, recreating their faces and performances in cutscenes, and putting their names front and centre of its credit sequence.

Although it took place in an open city, *The Getaway* didn't adopt the free-roaming structure that *GTA* was just then popularising. Instead, its London was the backdrop to a bleak riff on Guy Ritchie's cockney capers – the linear story of a helpless tough "running all over town" committing bucket-list crimes on behalf of the ageing gang boss who had kidnapped his child.

BELOW: Look past the hostage situation to the exit sign. Delicious attention to detail.

RHYMING GANG

Once the player arrived at the scene of their next shootout, Team Soho would whip out the magnifying glass, drawing interiors in intense detail. Witness the

Reptilian Gallery, home to an art exhibit filled with dozens of unique paintings and sculptures, not to mention information boards, leaflet stands and a receptionist who asks the protagonist if she can be of any assistance ("Nah I don't fink you can babe. I'm just browsin', awight?").

It might be thought of as unnecessary set dressing for a mission that quickly descends into clunky cover shooting, and concludes with a car chase at breakneck speed. But you can't argue with the sense of place and authenticity that results from it. *The Getaway* is that rare game enhanced by its product placement; where *Grand Theft Auto* leaned into parody, this competitor offered the uncanny realness of passing a Pizza Hut in a Lexus – the car brands fitting for a studio that first found its wheels with the PS1's *Porsche Challenge*.

After critical acclaim and commercial success, the core *Getaway* team followed writer-director Brendan McNamara to Sydney, where they set up Team Bondi – initially with the continued backing of Sony. Swapping out *Snatch* for *LA Confidential*, they envisioned another open world city, this time taking in Hollywood and the backyard of the Black Dahlia killer. Again, the blocks and blocks of meticulously remembered urban land were purely peripheral, left out of focus in favour of the main event: small-scale crime scenes which players would investigate, turning over discarded coffee cups with their hands, rummaging through handbags and bins in search of clues. Again, the team sought to rival cinema, investing in cutting-edge performance capture tech – asking players to analyse the expressions of actors in close-up, in order to determine whether suspects were telling the truth.

HEAVY PRICE

It remains an irresistible premise, but it was a costly one. In fact, *LA Noire* became the most expensive game project in Australian history. Before long, Sony backed out – and in a twist of irony, Team Bondi found a partner in Rockstar, which picked up the financial baton and carried it through to the bitter end.

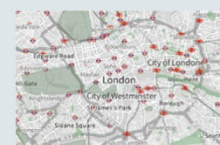


GET OUT

The lengths put into capturing London



1 The team took over 500,000 images of the bustling capital to work from.



2 One artist was banned from planning offices for looking at too much reference material.



3 A photoshoot around Soho led to a real-life chase as bouncers pursued the art team.

A LIFE OF CRIME

Team Bondi's road to success and scandal



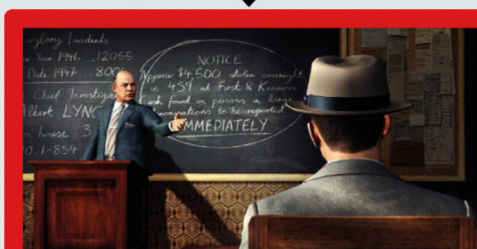
PORSCHE CHALLENGE
PlayStation racer with
mo-capped drivers.



THE GETAWAY
Meticulously rendered
London simulator.



THE GETAWAY: BLACK MONDAY
Started as an expansion pack.
Feels like one.



LA NOIRE
Lavish detective game embedded in a
GTA-style city.



WHORE OF THE ORIENT
Cancelled 1930s Shanghai story.

KEY
■ Team Bondi
■ Team Soho
■ Video Games Deluxe



**LA NOIRE:
THE VR CASE FILES**
One of the best VR games on PC.



'AAA OPEN WORLD VR GAME'
Mystery project with Rockstar.



» One anonymous ex-Bondi source, speaking to Brisbane-based journalist Andrew McMillen for GamesIndustry.biz in 2011, claimed Rockstar was incredibly hands-on – lending programmers, animators, artists and creative direction to the project. “Rockstar’s producers were increasingly influential over the last two years of the game’s development, and overruled many of the insane decisions made by Team Bondi management,” the source said. “Eventually Team Bondi’s management resented Rockstar for taking lots of creative control.” Certainly, *LA Noire* turned out to be indicative of Rockstar’s direction of travel after *GTA IV* – towards open worlds that were increasingly nuanced, even conversational, in tone.

Once *LA Noire* released, many former developers on the project spoke out publicly. In an investigation McMillen carried out for IGN, sources accused management of treating any staff outside the inner circle of Team Soho veterans as a disposable resource to be burned through. Junior employees were pushed to work long hours, sources alleged, leading to high turnover. When IGN suggested around 100 staff had left during development, McNamara said the estimate was actually low. “Of the people we tried to build the game with, most of them would’ve never had any experience with this kind of thing before,” said the studio head. “And most of them would never have made a game that had these kinds of expectations.”

CHINESE DEMOCRACY

Crunch time, one artist claimed, went on and on. With *LA Noire*’s release date regularly shifting, the finish line danced just beyond each staff member’s reach, pushing them to sprint for longer and longer. “If you wanted to do a nine-to-five job, you’d be in another business,” McNamara countered. *LA Noire* may have been a work of art, but much like the

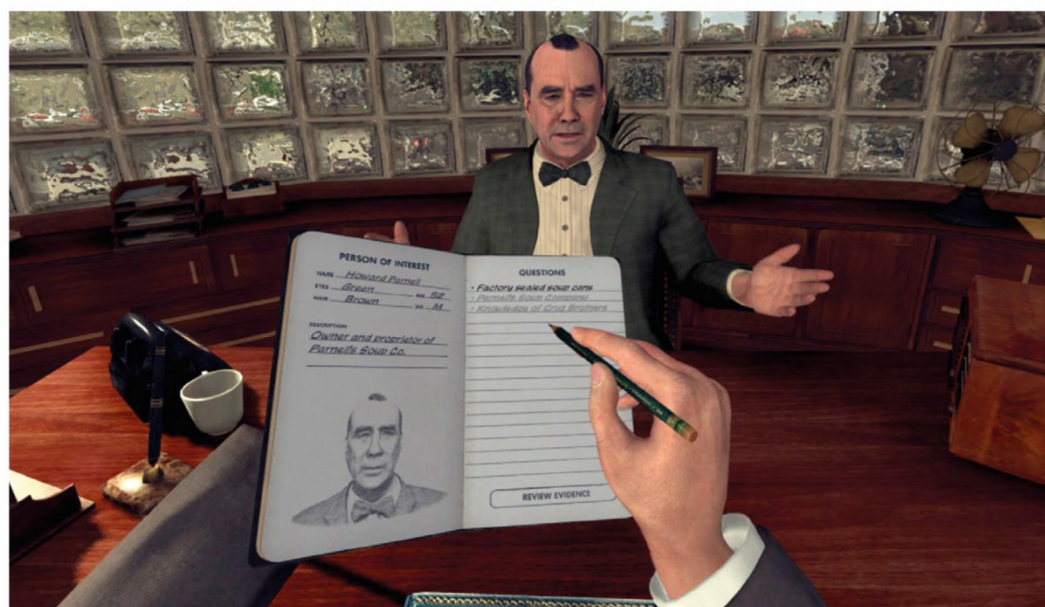
THE CRUNCH SCANDAL KILLED TEAM BONDI’S REPUTATION

Great Wall of China, it appeared to have been achieved at the expense of its workers.

In a lesson the games industry has failed to learn from, the crunch scandal killed Team Bondi’s reputation. In 2011, Kotaku published an article titled ‘Nobody Wants to Work With *LA Noire*’s Developers’. McNamara never directed his intended follow-up, another period action game, set in 1930s Shanghai. Yet he still works with Rockstar, in a quieter capacity, at Video Games Deluxe – the Sydney developer responsible for *LA Noire*: *The VR Case Files*, as well as an upcoming ‘AAA open world VR game’.

The medium makes sense: a natural fit for a team with a history of zooming in on the paraphernalia that litters a cityscape. Let’s just hope other, less celebrated aspects of its history don’t repeat themselves. ■

Jeremy Peel



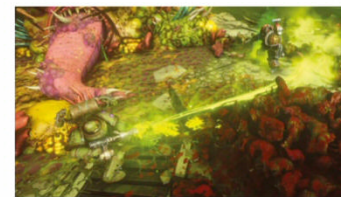
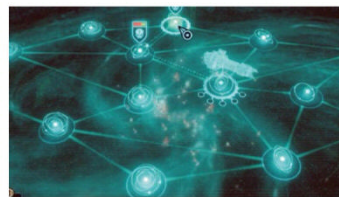
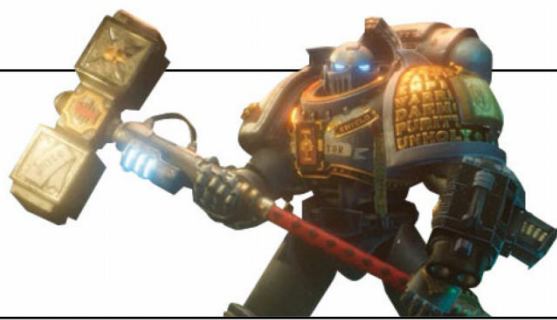
ABOVE: *LA Noire* encourages a methodical commitment to procedure.

LA Noire is really a game about Aaron Staton’s eyebrows.





Warhammer 40,000: Chaos Gate – Daemonhunters



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 5, 2022

DEVELOPER
Complex Games

PUBLISHER
Frontier Foundry

LINK
chaosgate.com

WARHAMMER 40K: CHAOS GATE – DAEMONHUNTERS

XCOM vibes, but with cosmic plagues and almost no RNG

Turn-based tactics games have been cursed with comparisons to Firaxis' indomitable *XCOM* for almost a decade, which the Grey Knights of *Warhammer 40,000: Chaos Gate – Daemonhunters* are about to learn. Sorry, lads, but *Warhammer 40,000: XCOM* is just easier to remember.

The Grey Knights, if you're not au fait with 40K's many Space Marine chapters, get their rocks off by hunting daemons, which they also happen to be very good at. These special boys were engineered from the gene-seed of the Emperor, and while they're designed to be the ultimate weapon against the forces of Chaos, most people don't know they exist. So they're black-ops super soldiers with an important daddy.

Like *XCOM*, you'll be putting together squads of these Grey Knights, customising them with equipment suited to the task at hand, and then dropping them into maps full of enemies and cover. The Grey Knights also have an HQ from which they can plan their next move, exploring a holographic representation of the space sector. But while the foundations cry *XCOM*, everything has been reconfigured for a universe of infinite war, where humanity faces down dark gods and cosmic plagues.

This specific set of Grey Knights have just finished a campaign, and with their resources low and their ship worse for

wear, they're about to head home. Nobody gets time off in the grimdark future, though, so of course an Inquisitor appears and tasks them with investigating a new plague conjured up by the pestilent god Nurgle: the Bloom.

KNIGHT SCHOOL

Worlds are being consumed by this blight, in turn empowering Nurgle and his horrible minions, and even walking tanks like Grey Knights need to prepare before they drop in and start carving up Plague Marines and Hellbrutes. Your massive space cathedral houses a Libris Malleus, where you can research the Bloom, develop tools to support your troops, and select one-shot psychic abilities; a Strategium containing the barracks, as well as an armoury that allows you to get your hands on better gear and more experienced knights; and the Manufactorium, where you can fix up and upgrade your ship, along with buffing up your knights. There's a lot to look at before the bolters start firing.

There are four different classes of Grey Knight, filling basic roles like tank and support, and four more advanced classes that are yet to be shown off. Between the weapons, armour, wargear, psychic abilities, and cosmetic customisation, there are a lot of ways to build a Grey Knight even within a single class, and that level of investment will probably make it sting all the more when they die (thanks to *XCOM*-style permadeath).

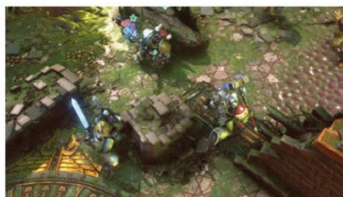
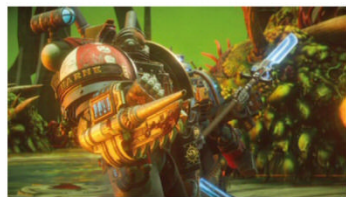
It's impossible to look at the list of practical gear and cosmetic flourishes and not have flashbacks to days spent hunched over my desk, building armies and kitbashing models. Much of what's contained within Games Workshop's Grey Knights Codex is present here, from their grenades to their Servo-skulls, along with fancy and unique master crafted weapons that you won't find elsewhere. You won't have access to everything straight away, of course, so you'll need to disrupt the plans of Chaos a bit before you start building your perfect squad.

Daemonhunters makes it easier to plan for dust-ups with Nurgle's nightmarish horde by doling out intel before you make landfall. The holographic star map shows you the level of corruption >>

NEW
INFO

THESE SPECIAL BOYS WERE ENGINEERED FROM THE GENE-SEED OF THE EMPEROR

Warhammer 40,000: Chaos Gate – Daemonhunters



on specific worlds, which informs what types of enemies you'll encounter, the likelihood of unwelcome random events, and what your mission objectives will be. Maps are transformed by the Bloom, with higher levels of corruption changing the layout and introducing new hazards. You can also see what the mission rewards are, allowing you to prioritise based on what catches your eye the most. Orbiting a world reveals even more information, like what strain of Bloom is affecting it, which determines what mutations and negative effects you'll have to worry about.

SICK AS HELL

I had to watch a developer beat up Nurgle's minions instead of getting to slay them myself, but even hands-off it really looks like Complex Games has nailed the feel of their Space Marines. These are hefty badasses that move with menacing deliberateness, but are still capable of surprising agility. And they are masters of extreme violence, dismantling maps as deftly as they dismantle their foes.

Nurgle, meanwhile, is shaping up to be a fun opponent. His worshippers are the most gruesome of all the Chaos abominations, and there are few things as unappealing as being grabbed by one of his plague-ridden Hellbrutes, all tentacles and boils. They must smell terrible. No wonder the Grey Knights are trying to rid the galaxy of them.

The prevalence of cover means you can play defensively, but it's destructible, and these daemon-slaying super soldiers are much more comfortable charging into the fray. This is really emphasised by the precision targeting system. At range, this means positioning affects damage, so you're more efficient depending on where you're standing relative to the enemy, but it's in melee where the system really seems to open up.

If you get in close to a stunned enemy and select a melee attack, you'll be able to select specific weak points. Targeting one spot might inflict bleeding damage, while breaking their weapon could lock them out of crucial abilities. Once they've taken a beating, you can execute them, putting them out of their misery with a flashy, cinematic coup de grace that's evocative

of a *Mortal Kombat* fatality. This also gets the Knights all fired up, giving everyone in the squad an extra action point.

NO DICE

Daemonhunters' relationship with RNG is one of the most notable deviations from the *XCOM* formula. The Grey Knights are the elite of the elite, so you know they're going to hit their targets. And you can see how much damage you'll be able to do from your position. When RNG does rear its head, it's to your benefit, as it gives you the chance to score a critical attack. This not only increases the damage of the strike, it's also another way to access precision targeting in melee.

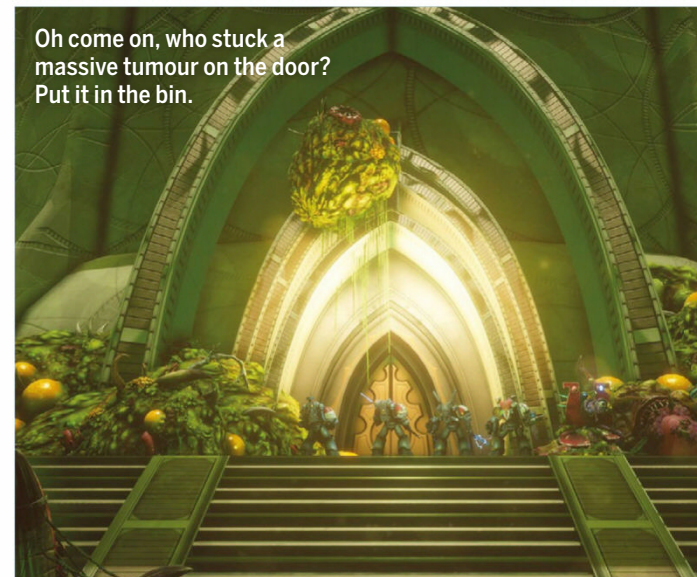
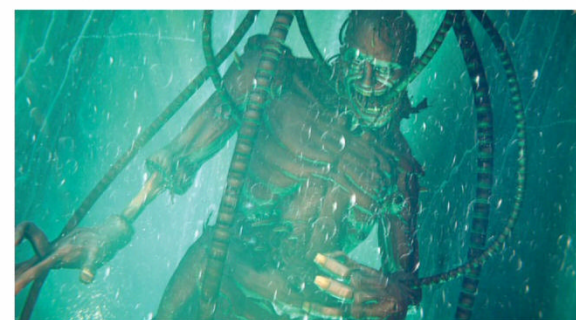
Warp surge events also introduce a bit of randomness in combat. You're warned about the likelihood of their appearance before you select the mission, but you won't know when they'll appear or what shape they'll take – maybe your troops will become afflicted with the plague, or enemies might develop new mutations, or a whole bunch of new enemies could be summoned. But when your back's against the wall, you've always got your psychic abilities to fall back on, giving your squad some extra pep or assaulting the enemy with psychic violence.

The environment can be used to your advantage, too, with *Daemonhunters* allowing you to demolish cover or even knock statues onto some unsuspecting Plague Marines. And there are a lot of statues. Humanity in the far-flung future just can't stop carving them. Pretty much everything can be destroyed, and it's not always about harming your foes – you can also break through walls to create new paths through the map.

At the end of the demo, the Grey Knights have to tackle one of the massive aforementioned Hellbrutes. It serves as the map's ultimate challenge, but there will also be proper bosses connected to the campaign narrative. Complex Games isn't giving much away, but they'll apparently be massive in both scale and capability, requiring a lot more work to take down, like drawing them into terrain where you get an advantage.

Despite the prevalence of tactics romps that evoke *XCOM*, *Daemonhunters* seems to embrace Warhammer with such gusto that it didn't feel like I was watching a repeat. The threat of the Bloom, the lack of RNG, and the hyper-violence all promise to set it apart, and we'll find out if it follows through when it appears on May 5.

Fraser Brown



Oh come on, who stuck a massive tumour on the door? Put it in the bin.

IT'S IN MELEE COMBAT WHERE THE SYSTEM REALLY SEEMS TO OPEN UP

Warhammer 40,000: Chaos Gate – Daemonhunters

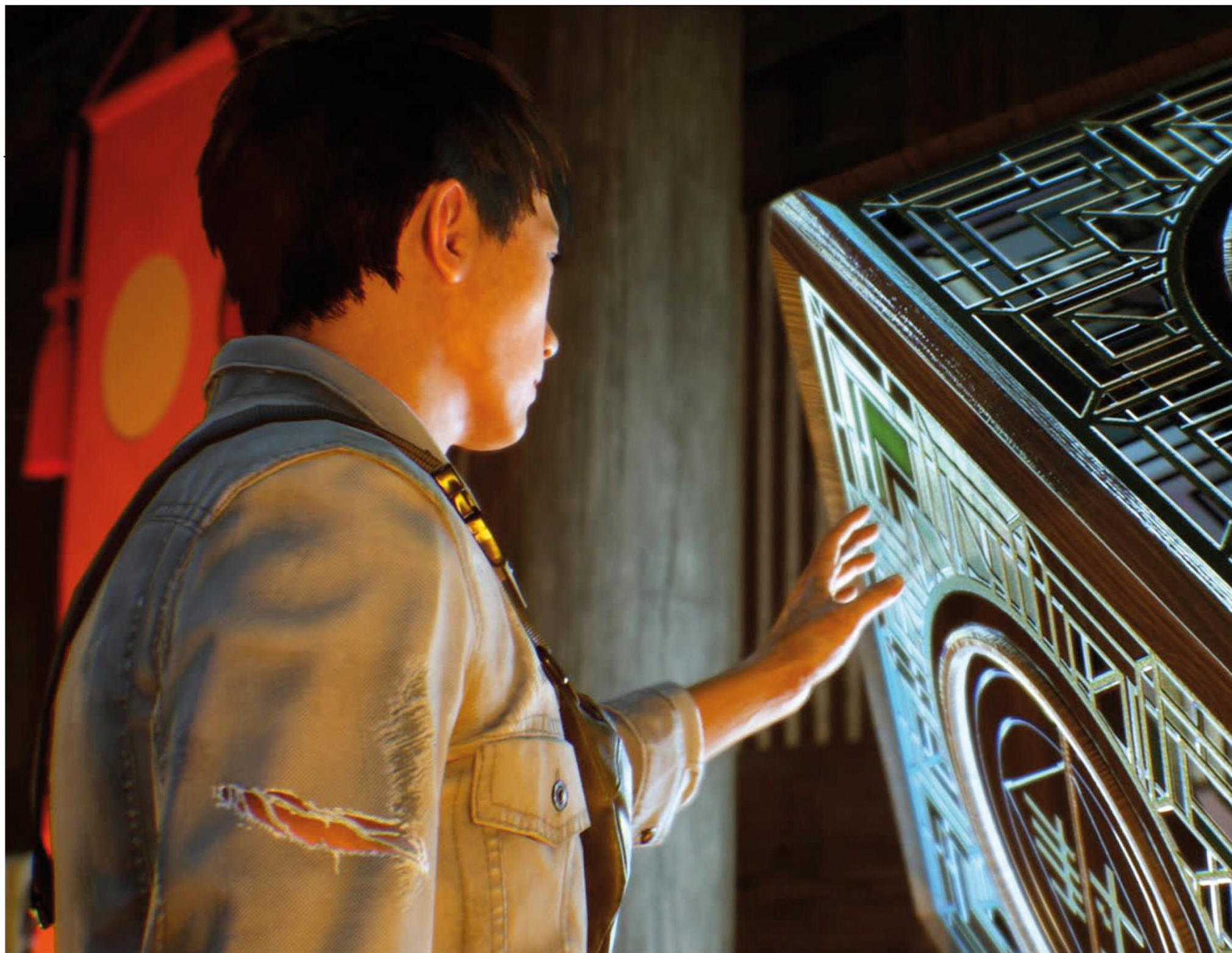


ABOVE: Andy Serkis of Lord of the Rings fame voices your stern but righteous mentor.

LEFT: Space Marines love an execution, almost as much as they hate heresy.

PREVIEW

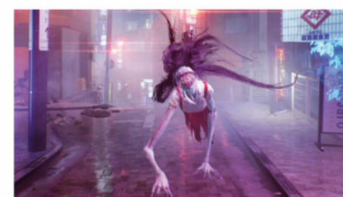
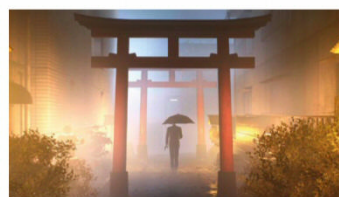
Ghostwire: Tokyo



ABOVE: Akito is new to the ghost thing too, so we're both in for surprises.

RIGHT: Ethereal Weaving is your main weapon against ghostly enemies.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 25, 2022

DEVELOPER
Tango Gameworks

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

LINK
beth.games/34jtNPC

GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

*Less *The Evil Within*, more *Watch Dogs 2* with ghosts*

Horror isn't my thing. A game about ghosts isn't especially appealing to me – let alone one with headless spirit children. However, a hands-off demo of *Ghostwire: Tokyo* changed my mind. It's more like a Japanese ghost-hunting *Watch Dogs 2* than a city wide *PT*, and it looks brilliant.

Though developer Tango Gameworks made the dark and scary *The Evil Within* series, *Ghostwire* isn't trying to terrify you in the same way. This early look set my mind at relative ease. I'm not sure that's entirely a good thing for those who might be searching for a disturbing horror experience, but for me a neon-drenched action game with a ghostly garnish is far more exciting.

You play Akito, a man on a mission to save Tokyo, and by extension, your family. The city's population has been transformed into spirits, and are slowly being lost to the void. The game nonchalantly mentions this is about 200,000 souls to save, at least. Luckily you don't have to save Tokyo on your own, because you've got ghost hunter KK living in your head. He's your guide and companion through this mess, and helps properly equip you for this hellish adventure.

You have a litany of tools at your disposal for dealing with dark spectral forces. Your main weapon is cool dancey hand magic. Doctor Strange eat your heart out. It's called *Ethereal Weaving*, and can be used to blast at your foes,

damaging them until a core is revealed. Then you can whip the core out of the monster with a tendril of magic, exorcising the demon or 'visitor'.

Ethereal Weaving can also be used as a traversal tool. Though you will be spending a lot of time on the ground, the rooftops are also an essential part of the story. Hooking onto bird-like spirits called Tengu will catapult you upwards and get you to all-new vantage points.

Additionally, you wield KK's spirit bow. As a massive nerd for real-life archery, a phantom bow is kind of hilarious to me as a concept, but in-game it's a solid long-range option to work with. With these tools you sneak and scuffle your way through Tokyo, seeking out Torii gates to cleanse, revealing more of the map and loosening the hold of the bad guy, Hannya. His motivation seems to be that he thinks spirits are better off in the ether, and that's where Akito and KK disagree with him.

GHOSTED

The most interesting section of the preview was a timed event where Akito became trapped in a building-sized spirit box. The block of flats became surrounded by a wall which threatened to close and demolish the structure with him inside it. To escape death, Akito had but a few minutes to find and destroy several orbs maintaining the spell. As this happens, the indoor environment of the building became a geometric nightmare. Doctor Strange came to mind once again as he sprinted across the ceiling of a stranger's home and scrambled through landscape doorways. The effect is really nifty, and successfully evokes its own kind of tension, no less exciting for being more superheroic than spooky.

For me the environment, enemies, and action all look excellent. I have my reservations about having to upload the souls you save throughout the game, and the now common map unlocking mechanic. I'm also curious as to whether there'll be enough variety to the city itself.

But overall, I'm feeling very positive about the upcoming release of *Ghostwire: Tokyo*, if partly because its stores are now operated by spirit cats who will call you a "humeown". Excellent work.

Imogen Mellor

YOU HAVE A LITANY OF TOOLS FOR DEALING WITH THESE SPECTRAL FORCES



I wish ghosts knew the meaning of personal space.

We Are OFK



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022DEVELOPER
Team OFKPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
ofk.cool

WE ARE OFK

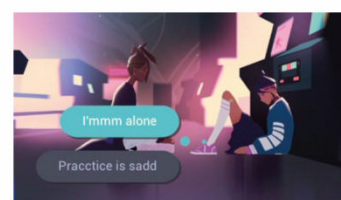
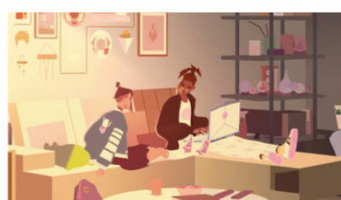
A fake band, a real videogame, and the joy of going with the flow

Who are OFK? The answer is slightly complicated. They're a sort of virtual band, starring in a game about how they got together and started making introspective indie pop. Imagine a low key, achingly hip, hyper progressive Gorillaz, and you're... probably a bit lost. But that's OK, because in chapter one of this narrative-driven experience, OFK are a bit lost too.

PLAYED
IT

Pianist Itsumi and singer/songwriter Luca are adrift, living in LA but struggling to figure out their dreams, let alone follow them. That is, until a chance encounter with a disarmingly confident music producer sets them on a new path.

The drama is almost comically low in stakes. There's anxiety, and heartbreak, and creative burnout, but no real threat or conflict. The characters live laid-back lives, enjoying a near endless stream of support from loving friends. To give you an idea, Itsumi and Luca's stifling office



jobs that they long to escape from into the world of music are... very cool, important roles at a wildly successful videogame company.

And you know what? I love that about it. It's a wonderfully relaxed story, brought to life with cosy music and a warm, soft art style. As the kids would say, the vibes are impeccable. Well-observed writing gives every meandering conversation and goofy text chain a remarkable authenticity, slowly building a sympathetic portrait of characters who in less deft hands would be the poster children for first world problems. The demo build only gives me access to the first of five chapters, but by the end of its roughly hour-long run time I'm completely enchanted.

A WONDERFULLY RELAXED STORY, BROUGHT TO LIFE WITH COSY MUSIC

HIT PLAY

That light, leisurely atmosphere extends to the game's approach to interactivity. Which is to say, there isn't much, really. You get to choose dialogue options, or what to reply to a text, but it hardly seems to affect the story. And that's fine – it helps emphasise a sense of going with the flow, involved in the characters' plights but not in control of them.

The final game will punctuate chapters with playable music videos – again only lightly interactive, but enjoyably surreal, which seems like it'll be a clever break from the subdued story. More importantly, the songs are really fun and catchy, showing off the genuine musical talent behind the virtual facade. You can listen to their first single, Follow/Unfollow, on Spotify now.

I can't wait to hear more of these tracks, in between luxuriating in the band's engrossing non-problems. Maybe you don't quite get it now, but when the full game launches this spring, I'll get to be the one telling everyone I was into OFK before it was cool.

Robin Valentine

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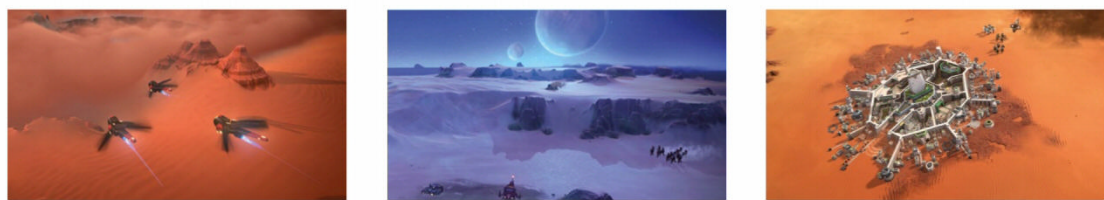
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PREVIEW

Dune: Spice Wars



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE Spring 2022 (Early Access)	DEVELOPER Shiro Games	PUBLISHER Funcom, Shiro Games	LINK dunegames.com
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DUNE:
SPICE WARS

We'll be Dune some spice mining

Arrakis. Dune. Desert Planet. We've seen it before in books, movies and games, but the desert planet of Shiro Games' upcoming *Dune: Spice Wars* takes its own approach to the world. While *Spice* remains key to gameplay, Shiro's approach tackles the broader galaxy of *Dune* in a way that most prior games haven't attempted.

I got to see *Spice Wars*' blend of 4X and RTS gameplay in a hands-off gameplay demo, and it's looking very promising. It included the broad outline of the start of a singleplayer *Dune* campaign as House Atreides, as the player ventured out from their single starting territory to explore the surface of Arrakis.

Dune: Spice Wars shares a lot of design basics with Shiro's critically acclaimed *Northgard*, an RTS cantered on capturing and controlling territories rather than spreading out over a wide-open map. That works pretty well with the 4X DNA present in *Spice Wars*. Expanses of desert terrain form distinctly-outlined territories which each contain a small town. Conquering the town confers control of the territory, and each section of desert can be exploited for resources like Spice for trade, Plascrete for buildings, or various rare commodities to sell for cash.

Taking territory is just not just about selecting some troops and marching them on over like you might've done in a *Command & Conquer* game. Factions like the Atreides can diplomatically annex small towns, but it takes a lot of time. They

can also roll in the troops, but that's expensive and dangerous: the locals put up a fight, and conquering one town will set others against you as Fremen bandits then come to raid your territory. Further, any troops venturing outside your turf are automatically on a clock: once they run out of supplies, they'll quickly die.

The desert isn't a homogenous expanse of sand. Deep Deserts are the equivalent of oceans in other 4X games, and foot units there rapidly run out of supplies and are at risk of sandworm attacks. Meanwhile, special territories like the polar ice caps can supply resources otherwise very hard to get.

NO PLACE LIKE CHOAM

Most of *Northgard*'s resources went towards building obvious material things. For that, *Spice Wars* really just has Solaris, Plascrete, Manpower, and Water. Truly taking control of *Dune* will require clever use of soft political currencies, in addition to agents to infiltrate and lobby important organisations. Meanwhile, your resources go towards backing up those plays by expanding your holdings.

Dune is a far more political than military work of science fiction, and *Spice Wars* appears to respect that. Though the game takes place only on Arrakis, the politics of the wider

Imperium and its factions are vital to success. Players will curry favour in the Landsraad, trying to pass resolutions and laws that favour themselves over others. The goal is to be appointed governor of *Dune*, but that's a path they'll find difficult if they're too aggressive in military conflict.

Landsraad favour is just one of the currencies players can accrue and spend. Your Authority goes towards pleasing factions like the Spacing Guild, Bene Gesserit, Emperor, and others, for which you get direct rewards. There's also the Spice sales and distribution company, CHOAM, which happily buys up all the spice you don't personally hoard – and you have to hoard some, since the Emperor also demands a direct tax in it. Remember: the Spice must flow.

You don't have to wait long before you can try some space politics for yourself – *Dune: Spice Wars* will released as a Steam Early Access game this spring.

Jonathan Bolding

TAKING CONTROL OF DUNE
WILL REQUIRE CLEVER USE OF
SOFT POLITICAL CURRENCIES



The largest city on Arrakis is the base of House Atreides.



ABOVE: Harkonnen troops, in red, deal more damage as they are hurt.

LEFT: You may hate each other, but diplomacy is still possible.

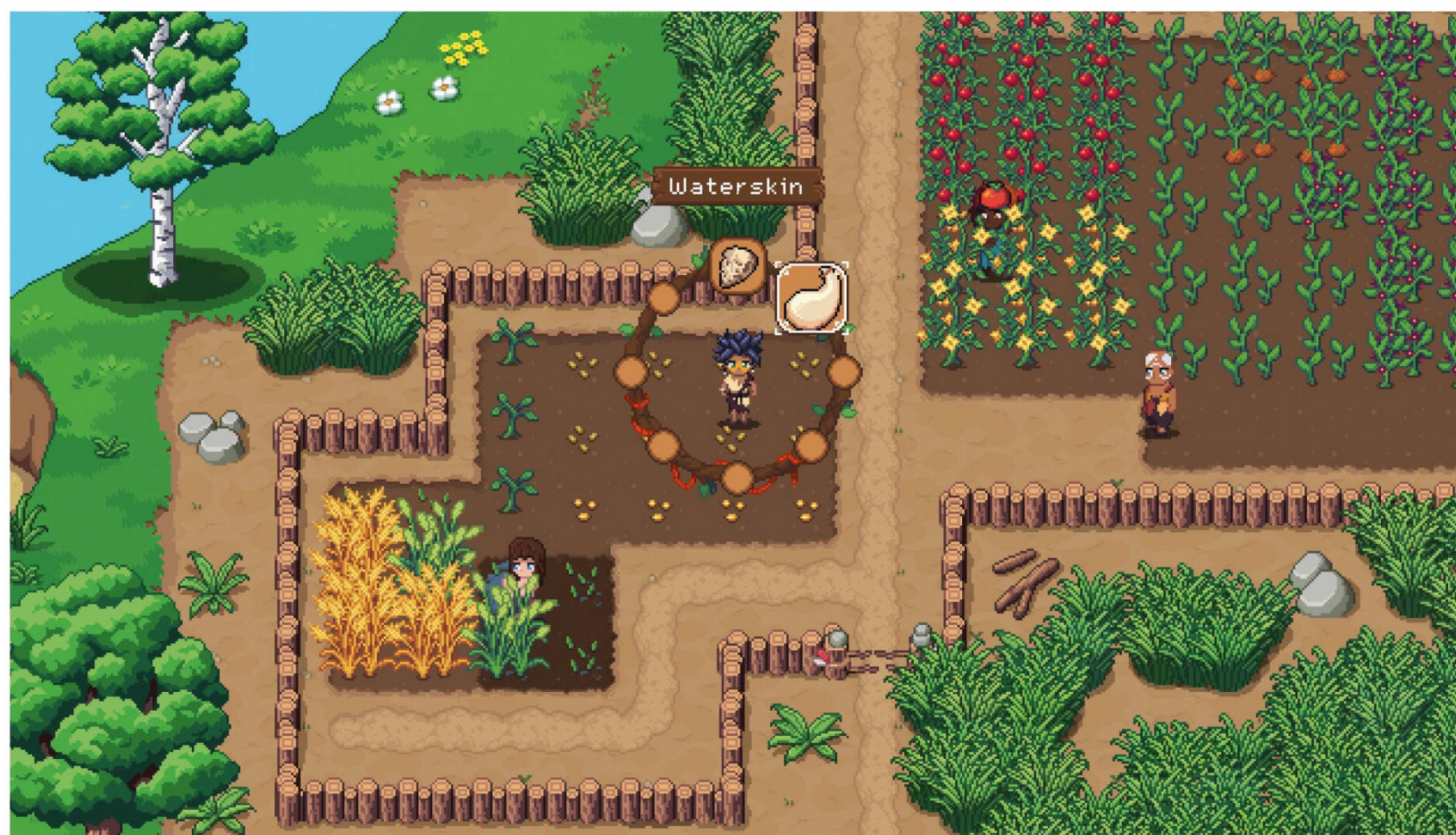
PREVIEW

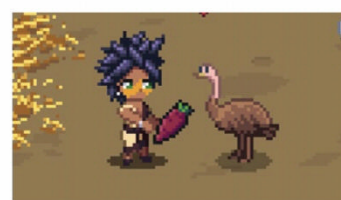
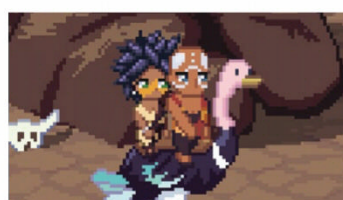
Roots of Pacha



ABOVE: I wish someone would invent bridges already.

RIGHT: Charming NPCs will send you off on errands.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Late 2022

DEVELOPER
Soda Den

PUBLISHER
Crytivo

LINK
crytivo.com/en/roots-of-pacha

ROOTS OF PACHA

The perfect farming sim for anyone keen on the stone age

Although still in its alpha stages, farming sim *Roots of Pacha* already has the potential to overtake its genre counterparts. At first glance, it's easy to assume another duplicate of the much-adored *Stardew Valley*, but with more intuitive tool systems and a welcome, communal approach to farming, it has enough new ideas to stand out.

Studio Soda Den, after a successful Kickstarter run and heaps of attentive tweaking, has begun to cultivate a serene setting and a wholesome, captivating narrative – one that even can be shared with friends in multiplayer mode.

Through it, we follow the traditions, innovations and foibles of the peaceful, prehistoric settlement of Pacha – a fictional village inspired by a diverse range of cultures. In a genre where most games are set in the modern world, with refrigerators and automatic milking machines, *Roots of Pacha* goes right back to the start, to the birth of agriculture itself.

You can't just buy seeds in a shop. You have to discover wheat, forage for veg, and impress the animals of the forest with gifts and music, like a stone-age pied piper. And it's not just the prehistoric twist that sets *Roots of Pacha* apart from other farming simulators.

For one, it turns out cavemen weren't forced to lug anywhere near as much stuff around with them. When you're starting out, a sharp stone is all you need – your hand axe handles everything from fishing,

to weeding, to breaking rocks. This supreme multitool approach right from the start is much appreciated when you're busy filling up your satchel with new kinds of veg and magic mushrooms, streamlining away early game friction.

Any tools you do acquire to improve your yield don't take up normal inventory spaces, either. They live on their own little wheel separate from your other items, as do the many seeds gathered while out scavenging in the wilds.

ME-ANDERTHAL

Once you've caught a fish, or harvested some carrots, you can place them in the community pot as a contribution. The more contributions you make, the more elaborate ideas you can develop to improve the settlement. Otherwise, you can keep them for recipes, smoke them to preserve them, or even gift them to a friend or prospective spouse.

When you're off looking for characters to collude with, there's no need to search the wiki for their location, or commit their daily schedule to memory either. You can just spot them live on the map, which makes advancing the narrative so much less of a pain.

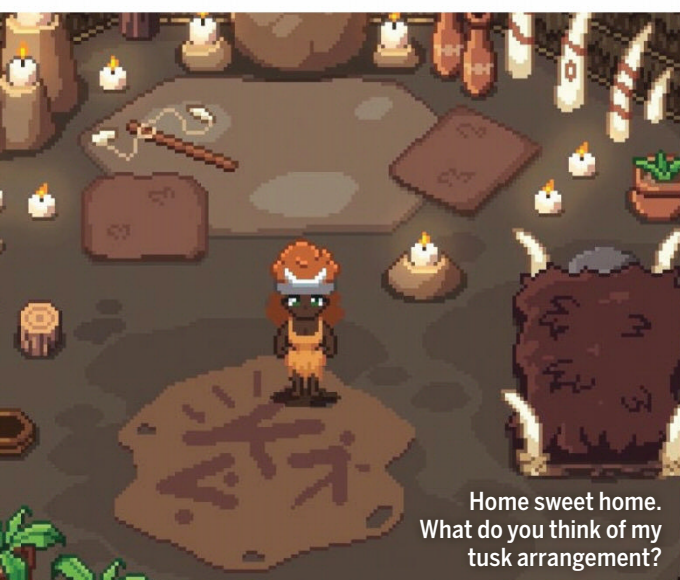
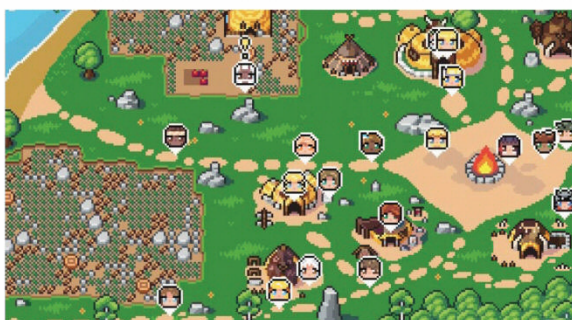
Even the little touches are surprisingly impactful. It's impossible to accidentally reap your crops, for example, and while that might seem inconsequential to some, the fact you can not only weave through weeds but also that no crops block your way is revolutionary. No more being concerned about which seeds need to be planted in rows, just vast, mixed-crop fields as far as the eye can see.

There is so much more to say, but right now I'm too busy looking forward to discovering ostrich mounts, and auto-watering contraptions for my crops.

The developer is aiming for a late 2022 release for *Roots of Pacha*, with plenty more updates on the way before then. There's a hugely welcoming Discord channel if you want to get into the community, and help improve the game with any suggestions.

Now to figure out what to do with this poop I just picked up and ponder why, strangely, no one seems to want to dance around the fire with me.

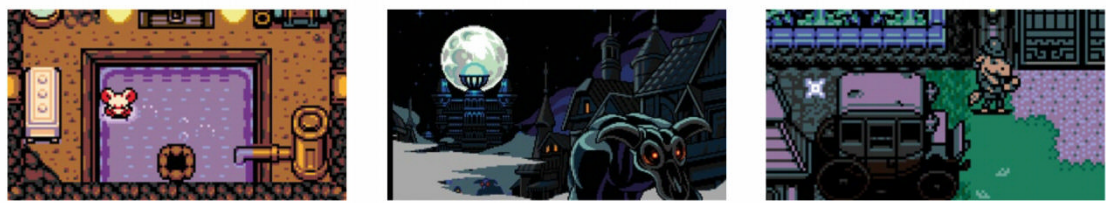
Katie Wickens



Home sweet home.
What do you think of my
tusk arrangement?

GOES RIGHT BACK TO THE START, TO THE BIRTH OF AGRICULTURE ITSELF

Mina The Hollower



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Yacht Club Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
yachtclubgames.com

MINA THE HOLLOWER

The *Shovel Knight* team's latest project brings a gothic challenge

When contemporary developers revisit the design conventions of gaming's past, they face an inevitable challenge. Authentically capturing the feel and look of older titles can be a tricky thing to balance with innovation. That's something the team that brought us *Shovel Knight* seems to be working through with their coming creation, *Mina the Hollower*.

Yacht Club Games' crowdfunded release openly evokes a very certain type of gaming experience. *Mina the Hollower* wears its action adventure influences on its sleeve, with the team happily pointing to *Castlevania*, 2D *Zelda* titles, and the Game Boy Color's crisp 8-bit visuals as sources of inspiration.

Playing the early demo, *Mina the Hollower* absolutely evokes a sense of those titles. Tonally, it leans into the eerie and gothic, and as has become expected of Yacht Club, the visuals are sharp, boil with energy and personality, and move magnificently. And, certainly, the stylistic legacy of *Castlevania* can be felt throughout the demo. The faux-isometric presentation and general systems, meanwhile, take a clear lead from *Zelda* and its ilk.

What all this means is traversing various landscapes, dungeons, and eerie gothic structures searching for keys, fighting monsters and sentient globules, and unpicking a story of a prosperous island that hides dark secrets – a narrative that hardly gets started in the available demo.

THIS IS A GAME WHERE YOU'LL HAVE TO BE AT PEACE WITH DYING A LOT

DIGGING DEEPER

So far, so familiar. There is, though, a slightly more complex game lurking beneath this work of apparent simplicity. It also sports a few flourishes that, if not truly unique, bring a fairly distinct flow to the experience. Armed with a whip, a sprightly jump and occasional secondary melee weapons that brought ranged attacks in the demo, Mina is a capable fighting machine. Yet is it her ability to briefly burrow underground and move quickly beneath threats or round obstacles that has let the game's creators shape environmental puzzles and combat dynamics that will hopefully keep Yacht Club's adventure captivating throughout.

You'll also find some streamlined RPG-like systems around levelling up weapons, filling and using health potions, reclaiming gains from previous lives, and allotting performance boosters to slots to prioritise certain abilities.

Mina absolutely faces a tough journey. This is an unforgiving game, and throughout the demo what could be mistaken for simple battles on first sight were complicated by erratic attack patterns, an abundance of floor holes to be knocked down, and a sometimes startling speed.

It's worth noting that for now the control inputs feel a little too loose and billowy to compliment the need for accuracy in combat and when negotiating obstacles. This is a game where you'll have to be at peace with dying a lot; but in the demo a lack of input responsiveness made some run-ins with the grim reaper a little bit frustrating. And yet the difficulty is part of the appeal here, because overcoming and progressing was always rewarding as I played. Meanwhile, the boss battle at the taster's end impressed a lot, bringing a bit of arcade gaming's frenetic flavour to proceedings.

Elsewhere, a lack of guidance in the very early game made working through the various upgrade and item systems somewhat confusing, so we can only hope that is addressed in the final version.

Thus far *Mina the Hollower* has proven delightful if a shade familiar, while punishing and charming in equal measure. It might not reinvent its genre, but there's plenty of promise in this mouse's tale.

Will Freeman

PLAYED IT



Falling to your death down those holes in the floor becomes a very familiar sensation.



ABOVE: The sharp, punchy, 8-bit-inspired visuals shine most during the cutscenes.

LEFT: Many of the characters you meet on your journey offer playful spins on monster tropes.

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

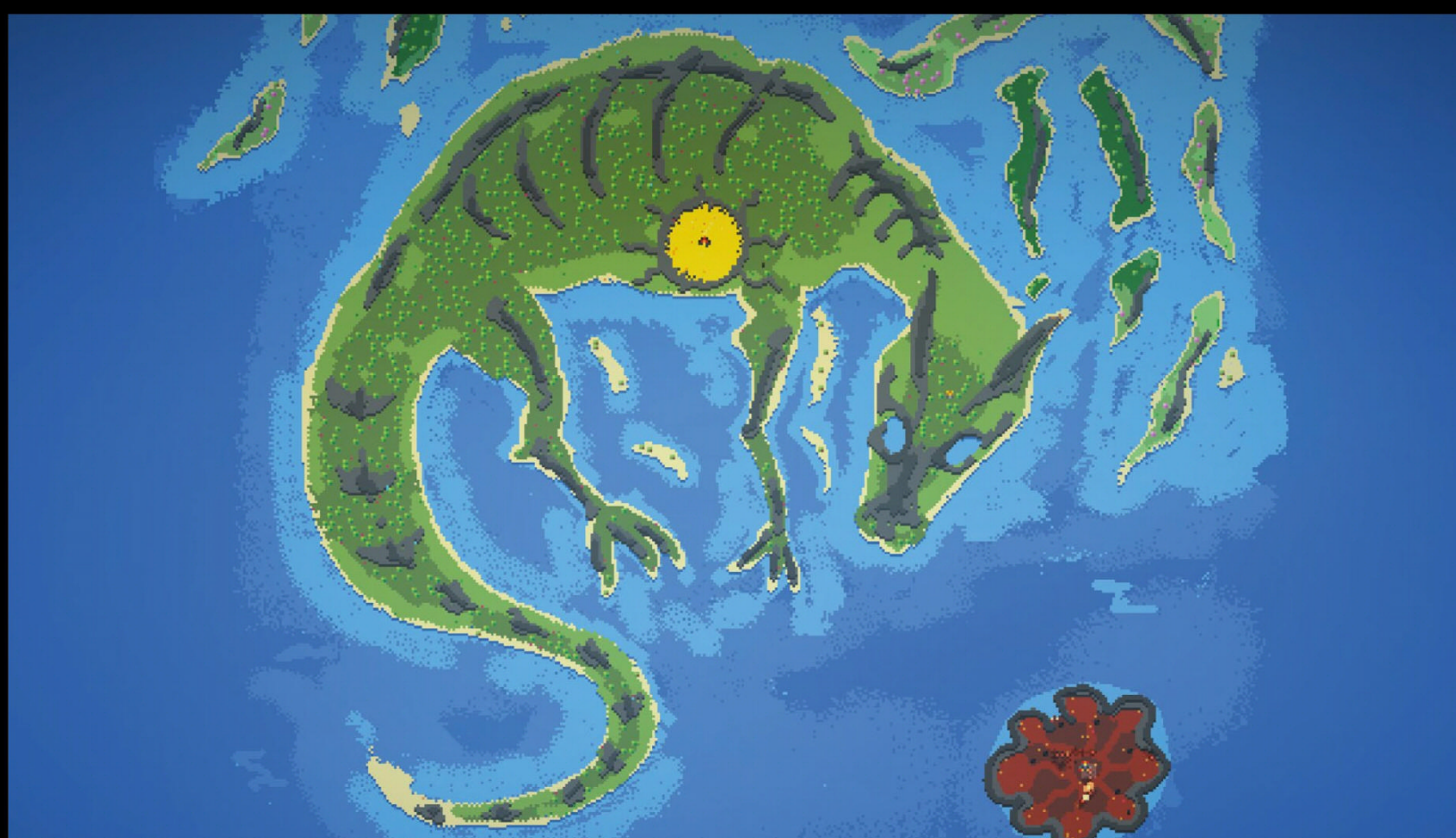
WorldBox – God Simulator



ABOVE: Oh dear, there appears to be a fiery demon on the loose.

RIGHT: The default island is a good place to start, just watch out for the volcano.

FAR RIGHT: The stats on every individual pull you into the game.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Maxim Karpenko

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
superworldbox.com

WORLDBOX – GOD SIMULATOR

Spooky action at a distance

The subject of the names sheep give themselves is not one that has often troubled the minds of PC Gamer, but it turns out some sheep are called Bah. Others Byyh. Still more take the name Boh, or even Baah. And don't get us started on the chickens.

Then there are the humans. Meet Vuk, who is 27 years old and has seven children. Vuk is a member of the Ulygash Hegemony, and lives in its capital of Ashombe (current size: one hut). It's all been generated by the game since Vuk was placed, with some sheep, chickens, and two other humans, around a beehive in the centre of an island. They were then left to get on with it, the expectation being that, humans being humans, a large honey-glazed barbecue would break out.

WorldBox likes to surprise you, and these humans prefer berries and tea to wings and ribs. The animals are also outbreeding the humans, despite Vuk's heroic efforts, so some wolves might have to be introduced for population control. What could go wrong with that? Humans are rather better at building huts, mining, and cutting down trees, however, and soon a civilisation begins to come together. The low-res pixel graphics give a basic idea of what's happening, but clicking on an individual gives you a load of stats on how they're feeling, their age, their name (it's hard to tell individuals apart, though a map filter will show you the leaders), and which kingdom they're

part of. Villages and whole civilisations have these stats too, rulers are born and age, and wars break out.

That's not the only way your pets can die, however. The odds are stacked against Vuk and Bah, as rather than the interventionist god of *Populous*, the player's role here is as a hands-off deity. WorldBox is marketed as a 'god simulator' rather than a 'god game' for a reason: you have little control over the creatures you place other than influencing their mood, cursing, or healing them, and there's not much actual 'game', no objectives or enemies other than those you create yourself.

DIVINE WRATH

The godly powers at your disposal also offer much more destructive potential than creative: sure, you can skip through the meadows sowing berry bushes, or you can unleash demons, zombies, nukes, dragons, volcanoes, houses with legs (one day we'll tell the tale of Hamo, the house that killed eight buffalo), acid rain, evil wizards, rhinos, a single enormous crab... there's even space for more things to be added to this panoply of pandemonium.

There's a full fantasy trilogy of orcs, dwarfs, and elves on offer, some of whom dislike each other, and they'll all build societies if left long enough. Eventually, roads snake between destinations, fires burn among the forests, humans cut down trees to clear land while elves build tents among the branches. High-ranking leaders are kitted out with legendary weapons, and you can see the number of kills they've made in wars.

There are several options at this point. I can raise a land bridge to close the watery gap between humans and elves, to see how the inevitable war plays out, or I can unleash a dragon or zombie apocalypse, or I can spin up a new set of islands, populate them, and see how these develop differently from the first.

WorldBox's graphical style might take a bit of getting used to in these days of 4K and ray tracing, but as a sandbox filled with ants for you to nurture, feed, terrorise, and burn as you see fit it has a lot of potential for entertainment. And the dogs? Dogs are called Waaf.

Ian Evenden

THERE'S A FULL FANTASY TRILOGY OF ORCS, DWARFS AND ELVES ON OFFER

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

Stellar Monarch 2



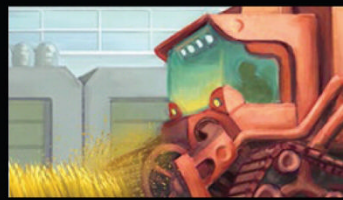
Beta - temporary graphics, unfinished

ABOVE: Currently, you can begin with just one planet, or in a more developed empire.

RIGHT: Audiences are attended by nobles and alien ambassadors.



Beta - temporary graphics, unfinished



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£19.50

DEVELOPER
Silver Lemur Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/StellarMonarch2

STELLAR MONARCH 2

The empire strikes back

With *Stellaris* not quite being *Crusader Kings* in space, it's fallen to indie devs to make games about Dune-esque space feudalism. We've had *Star Dynasties*, and the upcoming *Alliance of the Sacred Suns*. And, garnering a lot less attention, there are the *Stellar Monarch* games, quietly expanding while the bigger empires hog the limelight.

Like its predecessor, *Stellar Monarch 2* puts you in the role of emperor, while stripping away much of the busywork that you really think would be beneath them. Is it really the emperor's job to move individual ships around and fight tactical battles wherever they crop up?

So, battles are automated and off-screen, while settling new worlds will happen even without your input, thanks to AI that defends your interests and expands your empire, on your behalf. If enemies attack a colony, one of your fleets will move to defend it. Likewise, uncolonised planets will gradually be bolted onto your empire.

It can be hard to see that these things are happening, as you stare at a 2D star map. Instead, you have to hover over lots of tiny icons, and read pop-up tooltips to get a sense for the events going on behind the scenes. Thankfully, major occurrences – newly discovered worlds, or alien invasions – are brought to your attention at the start of every turn.

If you would prefer to stick your oar in, you can prioritise certain planets by 'encouraging' colonisation there, or tell

your admirals where to send their fleets. But your decisions are mainly high-level: declaring war and proposing trade agreements, and holding court for the houses that comprise your empire.

COURT SHORT

Before I go on, I should make it clear that this is in Early Access – very Early Access. There are features as yet unimplemented, and a paltry bundle of repeated narrative events, making the central court business less involving than it should be.

Every few turns, you get to sit on your big space throne and listen to the requests of the various nobles of your empire. There might be a dispute between two houses, or an incident that must be exposed, or covered up. Your decisions will influence house standings, augment your coffers, or spark future events. However, these scenes repeat too often, and lack meaningful repercussions.

Silver Lemur Games is open about the state of the game; there are even on-screen stats keeping you abreast of progress. Still, I was looking forward to some courtly intrigue, and it's barely here.

What is here is a skeletal, but robust 4X strategy game.

I feel encouraged by the depth of it. I enjoyed just scrolling the star map, hovering over those little icons to get a sense for the systems whirring under the hood. And there appears to be plenty happening: fleets moving around, planets being won and lost, and alien empires... though those feel a bit static.

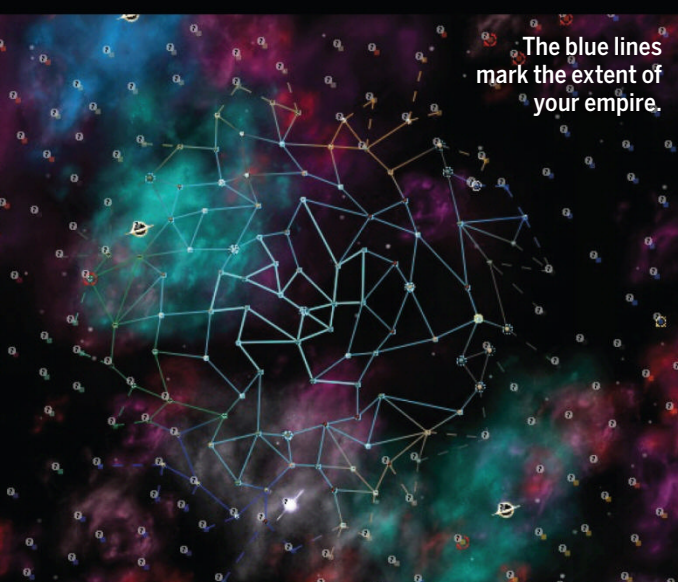
We're promised alien civilisations who "play by different rules" than our human empire. And that's true for insectoids the Hive. But the other civs – there are quite a few – seem fairly inert in this version. I'll be interested to see if, and how, this asymmetry will play out in a later build.

The Steam page isn't clear on how this is different from the previous game, but it features revamped battle mechanics, while there are plans for more high-level management systems. There are also additional game modes teased, which will focus more on internal politicking, or your entanglements with the aliens around you.

But I wouldn't buy this yet, if you've not played the previous game. Play that first, then circle back to this later if you're a fan.

Tom Sykes

MAJOR OCCURRENCES ARE BROUGHT TO YOUR ATTENTION AT THE START OF EVERY TURN



The blue lines mark the extent of your empire.

GABE



Is the **STEAM DECK** a PC gaming revolution, or just another hardware boondoggle?



Steam Deck specs

APU: AMD Aerith

Process:
7nm

CPU architecture:
AMD Zen 2

CPU clock speed:
2.4 - 3.5GHz

Cores:
4-core / 8-thread

GPU architecture:
AMD RDNA 2

GPU clock speed:
1 - 1.6GHz

Stream processors:
512

RAM:
16GB quad channel
LPDDR5 @ 5,500MT/s

Storage:
64GB eMMC / 256GB
NVMe SSD / 512GB NVMe
SSD

Display:
7-inch touchscreen

Native resolution:
1280 x 800

Refresh rate:
60Hz

Audio:
Stereo speakers, 3.5mm
jack, dual mics

Connectivity:
Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, USB
Type-C with DisplayPort
1.4 support

Battery:
40Whr

Size:
11.7 x 4.6 x 1.8-inch (298 x
117 x 49mm)

Price:
£349 (64GB) / £459
(256GB) / £569 (512GB)

GEAR

All Hands on Deck

How does it play? *By Wes Fenlon*

There's going to be a whole cottage industry of Steam Deck accessories – the versatile USB-C dock, the fastest micro SD card, the most convenient travel keyboard and mouse – but I'm here to tell you that the single best Steam Deck accessory is a throw pillow. It turns out that the small, overly firm decorative pillows have been on our couches all this time just waiting for a higher calling: a Steam Deck to plop down on top of them. After hours of gaming on Valve's new handheld PC I'm amazed by how capable it is, but that power comes at a heavy price. As in, like, the Steam Deck is really heavy.

It's inescapably a bulky device, weighing 68% more than the Nintendo Switch and 38% more than an iPad. Holding it high enough to keep my neck happy, I started feeling a twinge in my forearms after 20 minutes of *Resident Evil 2 Remake* and definitely needed a break before an hour was up. Thankfully all it takes is a pillow to solve my biggest criticism of the Steam Deck – as soon as I nestled one into my lap, I was cosy

and ready to spend a whole evening emulating *Persona 3*, exactly the PC gaming experience I hoped the Steam Deck would give me.

BEST OF BOTH

From the beginning Valve has insisted that the Steam Deck is a PC that you do whatever you want with. Take it apart, install Windows, futz around on the Linux desktop to install other launchers. That's all true, but the more I use the Deck, the more I'm genuinely amazed at how well it manages to be both PC and console, simultaneously deeply versatile and dead easy to use. Valve's debut of SteamOS with Steam Machines may have flopped, but years of iteration have finally turned it into a secret weapon.

The UI is intuitive: the 'Steam' button brings up a menu of major screens like your library, the store, downloads, and settings. The '...' button pulls up a quick settings menu that would look at home on a smartphone, with brightness and volume sliders and toggles for features like Wi-Fi and night mode. The battery tab gives a nice estimate of how much life you have left based on the current use, and the advanced options let you tinker with all the framerate and power limits you want.



TOP: Even though it's heavy the Deck is easy to control.

BELOW: *The Witcher 3* runs great on the Steam Deck.

It all works seamlessly while a game is running. So does the controller configurator, the Deck's greatest feature. If a game lacks official controller support, like Japanese indie classic *Cave Story+*, you can press the Steam button while it's running, open up the controller settings, and likely pick a community-made configuration that works brilliantly (shout out to copy's bindings for this one). The PCSX2 and Dolphin emulators I installed weren't





built with controller-friendly UIs, so I set up the Deck's trackpad as a mouse and its back grips as left/right click, then configured the rest of the inputs to mimic the original console controllers. I could even bind keyboard shortcuts like save states to the leftover grips.

That flexibility allows the Steam Deck to stretch beyond what consoles are typically capable of, but SteamOS still delivers their biggest perks. I'm in love with how seamlessly suspending games works: even when I'm running an emulator I can just tap the power button to put the Deck to sleep and pick up where I left off an hour later. The same goes for hopping into settings while a game is running and then returning to the action. Alt-tabbing often isn't even this smooth.

THE RIGHT STUFF

Bouncing around my Steam library has reassured me that most games will work on the Deck even if Valve hasn't slapped a Verified badge on them. It's also helped me hone in on what, exactly, I want to use this device for.

Breezy games like *Monster Train* and *Into the Breach* run with gigahertz to spare, but I've happily played both on my six-year-old ultralight laptop, too. While the Steam Deck is portable enough that I'd pack it for a trip, it's too chunky for me to toss in a backpack for a day out and about, which I *would* do with a Switch. It's impressive that *Resident Evil 2 Remake* runs at a stable 60fps, and Nightdive's new

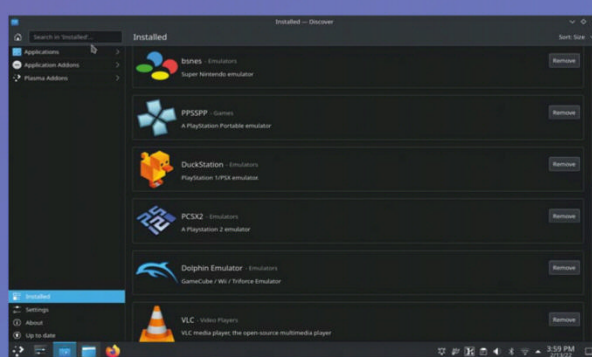
FROM THE BEGINNING VALVE HAS INSISTED THAT THE STEAM DECK IS A PC YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU WANT WITH

retro shooter remaster of *Powerslave* runs like butter too. But I'd rather play both on my gaming PC, where I can max out *Resident Evil* to appreciate that moody lighting and aim with a mouse in *Powerslave*.

This will naturally differ for every PC gamer. To me it's a good fit for moderately demanding indies like *Death's Door* and *Hades* that don't run at 60fps on the Switch. Emulation, though, is why I'd buy it. I just can't sit at my desk to play 100-hour JRPGs, but now that I can play them under a blanket on the couch without hogging the TV? Hoo boy, do I have a lot to catch up on. ■

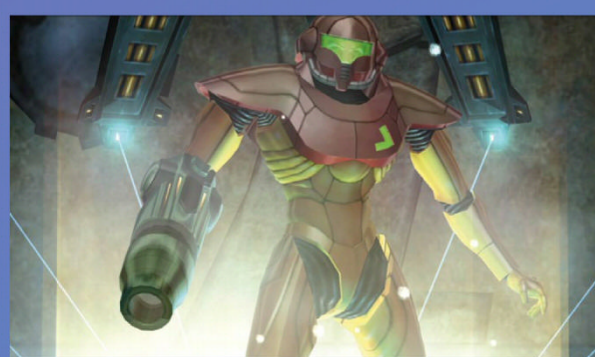
History in your hands

The Steam Deck truly is an emulation dream machine



Setup

The Deck can swap over to a Linux desktop, which includes a handy app store that can install loads of up-to-date emulators with a click – no terminal fuss! It makes the process of setting up emulators remarkably simple. I used desktop Steam to add them to my library for easier access and controller mapping, then just copied the games I wanted over on a USB-C flash drive.



Dolphin

I told myself I'd use the Deck to finally finish *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door*, but the second I loaded up *Metroid Prime* those plans melted away. It runs at a beautiful 60fps (aside from a few frame drops when opening doors) and still has atmosphere off the charts, while getting a projected five-and-a-half hours of battery life.

KEY SETTINGS: 2X INTERNAL RESOLUTION, KEEP RENDER WINDOW ON TOP



PCSX2

Detected controller mapping out of the box, so I jumped right into the famously bizarre *Mister Mosquito* before playing five hours of *Persona 3 FES* with a widescreen hack enabled. The Deck never dipped from 60fps and projected six hours of battery life.

KEY SETTINGS: 2X INTERNAL RESOLUTION, MTVU MULTITHREADING



PPSSPP

Incredibly easy to use. You can navigate this PSP emulator's UI with the analog stick instead of relying on Steam's trackpad mouse mapping. I just pointed it to my game folder and dove into the sole game I have this emulator for (with perfect performance): *Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together*.

KEY SETTINGS: 3X RESOLUTION, NEAREST TEXTURE FILTERING





Steamed RAM

How does the hardware perform? *By Dave James*

The Steam Deck is one of the most versatile, most intriguing gaming PCs I've ever played with. It's a handheld device that will draw immediate, probably unfair comparisons with Nintendo's Switch, but is 100% PC in both the best and worst ways.

It's important to note I'm writing this before launch, with a 512GB version of the Steam Deck that still has to be considered unfinished. But that's only in relation to the software side of the equation and, while that is absolutely vital to the smooth running of the device, the hardware itself is final. And really impressive.

Core to the whole thing, and the piece of the puzzle most responsible for the Deck actually being a genuine gaming PC, is the AMD silicon sizzling away at its heart. The custom-designed

AMD Aerith APU (heavily based on the long-rumoured AMD Van Gogh design) is using the same GPU cores as those in the outstanding RX 6000-series graphics cards. Yes, the ones you're still struggling to buy.

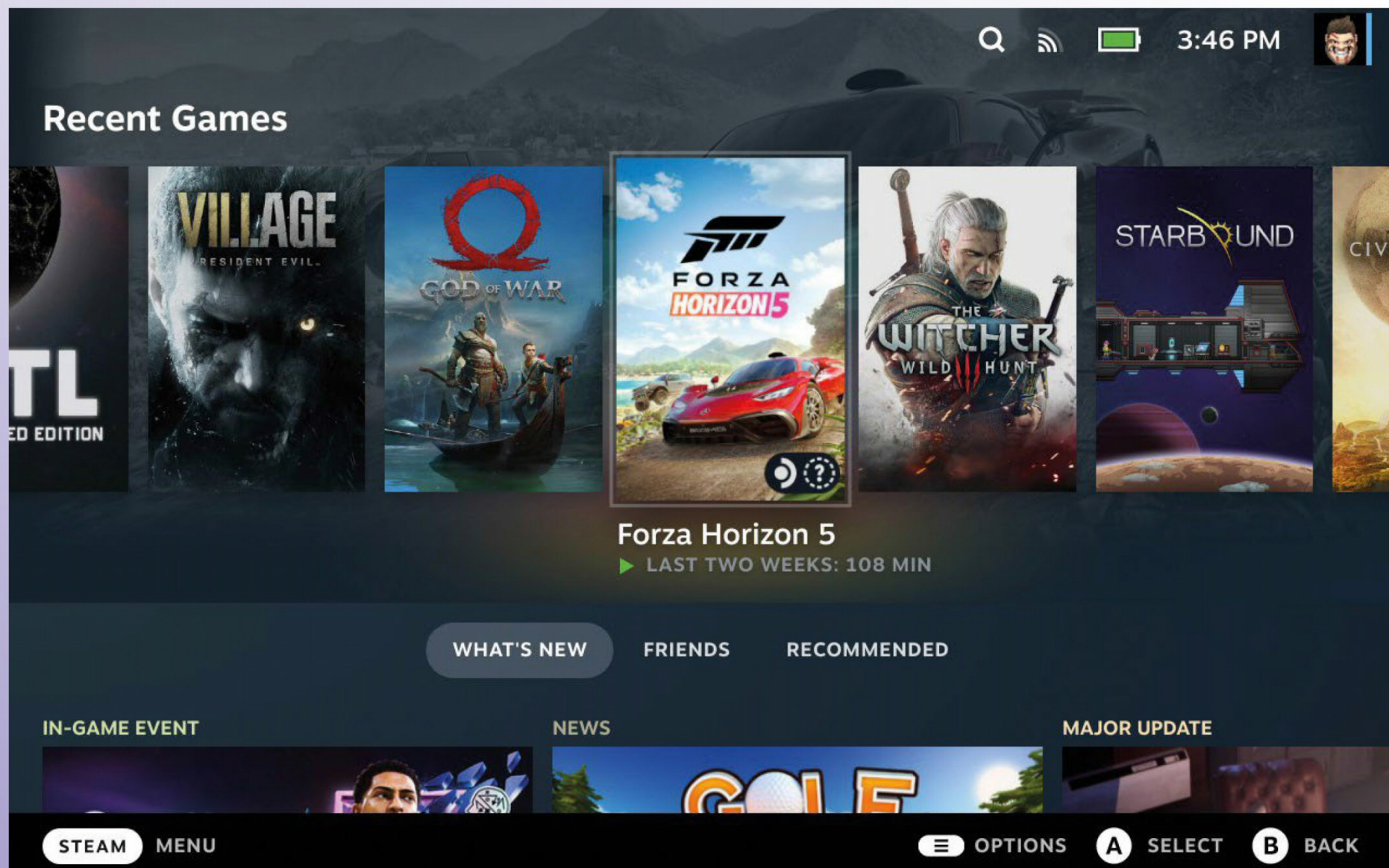
One of the key tenets of the chip is its sustained performance. There's no throttling here. Whether you're getting your juice from the mains or roaming free, sucking on the 40Whr battery inside the Deck, you will get the same performance no matter what. And that sustained performance is great, too.

STACKED DECK

At the reveal event I listened with some scepticism as Valve devs claimed the Deck would be able to run your entire Steam library and they had yet to find a game the hardware couldn't handle. But, while we've found some Windows games in our libraries that won't run on Valve's custom SteamOS Linux distro, the majority do, and run well.



**OUT OF THE BOX, THE
GAME WAS LOOKING GREAT
AND RUNNING AT
AN UNBELIEVABLY
SMOOTH 81FPS**





I'm not just talking about having *Stardew Valley* and *FTL* running like a dream either (though they obviously do), I've had *The Witcher 3* looking great locked at 30fps, with *Deathloop* on high between 30 and 45fps, and even *Forza Horizon 5* skipping across the desert at a 47fps framerate with high settings. The one that really got me was just how well *Resident Evil Village* plays on the Deck, though. Out of the box, the game was looking great and running at an unbelievably smooth 81fps on average.

That's largely thanks to the fact I'm outputting to its 1280x800 resolution screen, but we've long had integrated laptop graphics struggling to get playable framerates, at high settings, in modern titles at 720p. AMD's first RDNA 2 APU looks a winner if the Steam Deck is anything to go by.

We've not been so lucky in other games, however. *GTA V* refused to get past Rockstar Social Club, *Skyrim* sadly freezes regularly despite otherwise great performance, *Civilization VI* (listed as a Deck Verified title) doesn't load, and neither did *Halo Infinite*. Though that meant my ego was not bruised from being brutalised online, struggling with the gamepad-based controls.

Then I've also had *Valheim* running like a bit of a dog, too, despite it not really being the most demanding of games. At high settings in the Viking survivalists' playground I was seeing an average of just 23fps, with minimum framerates at just 14fps.

Still, the fact that a host of modern, high-end games run so well on this wee handheld – the majority we tried in fact

– is testament to the work Valve has put in on the Deck and its Proton Windows game compatibility layer. And future updates may still solve this issues.

POWER PLAY

The issue with running at both high framerates and high settings with a sustained level of performance, however, is the battery takes a pounding. We're used to gaming laptops with battery lives measured in minutes, but as a handheld gaming device the Steam Deck needs to do better than that. And, when I first pulled it from that travel case, it most definitely did not.

About an hour-and-a-half uptime was the standard response from running any of these games, but Valve has now added in advanced settings which allow you to set a global limit on framerates, TDP, and GPU clock speed. Lurking in there is also a setting which allows you to add AMD's FidelityFX Super Resolution to any game running on the device. That's an incredibly powerful feature which has the dual benefit of improving both performance and battery life.

With these settings in tow, set to a stable 45fps, I'm now seeing battery life going into the three hour mark and beyond, with *Football Manager* hitting a pleasing five. Messing around in *FTL* and *Starbound*, maybe I might even be able to get close to the mythical eight hours Valve originally promised.

Throw an external battery pack into your bag and there's a transatlantic flight's worth of high-end PC gaming in the Steam Deck. ■

FAR LEFT: Even if a game isn't 'verified' with the Steam Deck most games we tried mostly worked. Mostly.

BELOW: The library screen is your classic Steam library plus a list of the titles that are 'Great on Deck'.

Sorry, what?

Failing the significant other test

Thermals

Thanks to the AMD Aerith chip's sustained performance the chip does get warm. In-game I was regularly seeing the Deck's silicon, both CPU and GPU components, hitting around 77 to 83°C. That's well within the capabilities of the system's cooling, and won't have an impact on the lifespan of the device, but it's not quiet.

Hot stuff

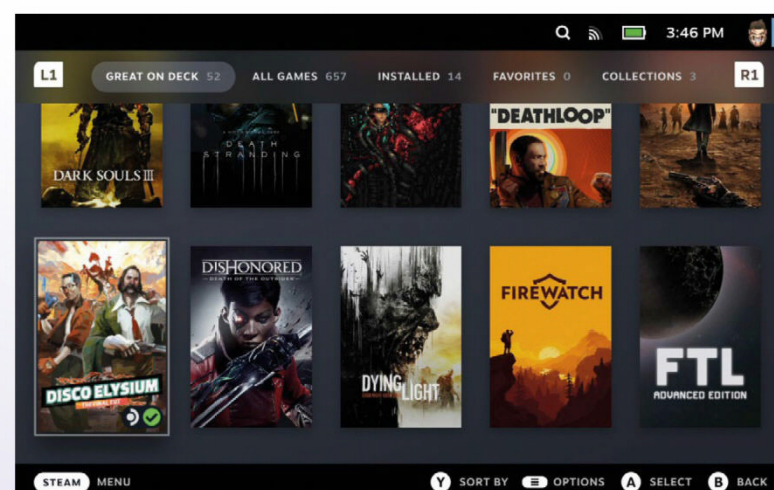
Thankfully, because of the Deck's chonk design, you're not going to get scorched hands playing at that temperature for any length of time. The ergonomic grips on either side of the device blessedly never get hot, and the main vents pushes hot air out of the top of the chassis, and away from you.

Decibels

Sadly PCG Towers does not afford us a soundproof room in which to carry out proper acoustic testing, but sitting zen-like in a small silent space in my house I was able to measure the sound of the Deck during gameplay. And 48 to 50dB means it's very much a noticeable noise when the fans are going. Which is most of the time.

Pitch

The actual noise itself isn't the big issue, however. The thing which really grates is the pitch of that fan noise. There is a notable whine to the sound and that will grind on you over a lengthy play session – it certainly did for my wife as I was playing *Forza Horizon 5* on the sofa one evening.





I'VE PLAYED RESIDENT EVIL
VILLAGE ON THE BUS INTO
THE PC GAMER OFFICE,
THEN PLUGGED THE DECK
INTO MY MONITOR

Deck Tech

Could it replace your PC?

By Dave James



Plug and play

1 Plug the Deck into a dock, connect a keyboard, mouse, and monitor, and you've got yourself a whole gaming rig ready to roll. You can go with the standard SteamOS UI, like a modded version of Big Picture Mode, but there is also a desktop mode. This operates like a normal Linux desktop, and functions a lot like the Windows OS you're used to. USB devices are plug and play, and most of your favourite apps can be loaded from its Discover software centre. The only issue I've had so far is lack of DisplayPort support and a complete refusal to output at the 21:9 ratio of my ultrawide monitor.

Office-ready

2 I've played *Resident Evil Village* on the bus into the PC Gamer office, then plugged the Deck into my monitor at my desk and started work. In fact, I'm writing this copy on a wee TKL gaming keyboard plugged into my Deck, listening to Spotify playing in the background on the desktop through my wireless Razer gaming headset. And, with so many of our productivity tasks bound to online portals, such as Google Docs, who needs Word these days? It's genuinely impressive that I can do my entire job on the Deck, from writing, to CMSing copy, firing emails off into the ether, and editing images on GIMP, it's all just a dock away.

Stream Deck

3 The top machine only comes with 512GB of storage, but with the latent game streaming potential of the device that becomes less of an issue with a solid internet connection. It also means only good things for extending your battery life. Steam's Remote Play means you can stream games from your more powerful desktop rig should you wish, and with Chrome installed on the desktop UI you have instant access to GeForce Now. So yes, you *can* play *Fortnite* on the Steam Deck, and any number of other high-end games at blistering framerates via Nvidia's streaming setup. Sadly only with keyboard and mouse right now, as the controller isn't recognised by Chrome.

Costcutters

4 With the Index, Valve went for the biggest, baddest VR headset it could make, but the Deck sees Gabe's gang taking a different tack. This is affordable computing in a world where such a thing seems to have taken a back seat. And don't think about this as just a handheld gaming device either, this is a full budget gaming PC. Handheld gaming PCs often cost well in excess of £1,000, and the fact the mid-tier Deck is less than half that shows where Valve's priorities lie with this device. If you want a versatile, affordable gaming PC, and can't face the costs of desktop GPUs or gaming laptops, then the Steam Deck is an incredibly tempting, cost-effective alternative.



Wes Fenlon

PC GAMER VERDICT

The more I use the Steam Deck, the more I marvel at all the pieces Valve had to perfectly align to pull this off. The UI is intuitive. Steam's controller configurator is so clutch, simulating the mouse in an emulator or letting me pick a perfect community-made profile for a kb/m game. Games mostly just... work! I'm fantasizing about a v2 that's an inch narrower and 25% lighter – the Deck really is a chunky lad – but it's still sinking in that this is a proper PC that's as easy to use as it is powerful.



Dave James

PC GAMER VERDICT

The performance of the Steam Deck is a marvel, but the fact you have to tweak settings to get the system and your games running right means any hope of it delivering a simple console-like experience are long gone. I mean, it will just work, it just won't work well. Or have anything like a functional battery life if you don't dig around in those advanced Deck settings. But I also can't forget that price, and that any other equivalent handheld PC I've ever toyed with has the same struggles, and costs three times as much.

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WATCH THIS SPACE

What went down in **THE NEW WAR**, and what's next for **WARFRAME** in 2022

By Samantha Greer

W

arframe's latest chapter in its strange sci-fi saga packed a lot of revelations and twists into its running time,

and dived into some of the story's oldest questions. Be warned, the article ahead contains spoilers for the whole story to date.

Rebecca Ford, live operations and community director for Digital Extremes, spoke with me about the quest and their pride in delivering it at long last. "It may not have been what players expected overall, but it was such a true testament to the story we wanted to tell, and I'm just happy that people cared enough to come back and try it."

Perhaps the biggest surprise for players who had been teased for so long was that *The New War* wasn't really about the war itself. The system-spanning battle against the invading Sentients takes up only a single act of the story, and the battle ends in total defeat. The Lotus and Tenno are thrown into the void, while villain Ballas positions himself as leader of an empire made in his own image. The Narmer Empire. By the end of act one the solar system is completely in their hands, and to cement this break away from the expected story, players are thrust back to the login screen, as if our defeat was so ultimate we can't even

stay in the game. *Warframe* has always been clever at using little meta-moments to elevate its important story beats, and *The New War* was no exception.

When players return to the world of *Warframe*, not all hope is lost. They're put in control of a mysterious, masked stranger... one who's shockingly mortal, and must rely on stealth as they wage a war against the new Narmer Empire. The reveal that they're an older looking version of our Tenno player character, the Operator, now referred to as the Drifter, won't catch anyone by surprise. But that turns out to be another clever bit of misdirection.

VOID TRANSACTION

One of the new quest's most delicious additions was the flashbacks to the Operator's childhood aboard the Zariman Ten Zero, the infamous ship which carried the children who'd become Tenno through the void, and brought them back with exceptional but uncontrollable power. We learn the curriculum the children were being taught centred around causality and parallel universes. What happens afterwards, once they enter the void, has been recounted by the Operator before: the adults were driven mad, leaving the children to fend for themselves until rescued.

The big shock is an appearance by an unexpected visitor: The Man In The Wall. Here we find out not only was this enigmatic entity aboard the





THE MAN IN THE WALL FINALLY MAKES AN APPEARANCE IN PERSON

» Zariman, again posing as a doppelgänger of the Operator, but they're the one who gave the Tenno the power of the void that allowed them to save themselves.

It's part of a deal though, one they have the Operator shake on. My money is on there being some kind of debt to be repaid, and a long time in the making cost for the power the Tenno have wielded.

This information is what allows the Operator to return from the void in the present, an action which reveals that, yes, the Drifter was not the Operator but someone else. Sort of. It's a twist that was originally intended to be part of *The Duviri Paradox* but brought forward to better set up that coming expansion. "It's very difficult to set up the world of Duviri with a blank slate, so we wanted to ensure that the concept of Duviri could be introduced earlier." But as to whether the person sown in *The Duviri Paradox* trailer was an older version of the Operator or simply the Drifter, Digital Extremes isn't giving anything away. "The best

ABOVE: DE are showing no signs of slowing down – expect things to get even wilder from here.

clarification I could give you would be, that when *The Duviri Paradox* launches, you'll have your answer."

CATCH MY DRIFT

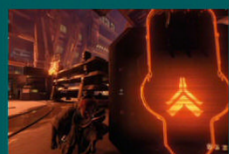
The Drifter is a version of the Operator that never received the powers of the void, and had to survive aboard the Zariman alone. It's a rug pull as audacious as the initial reveal of the Operator in *The Second*

Dream. *Warframe* has mastered the art of 'you're not playing as the person you think you are' and using it as a clever device to explore its themes of identity. This game has two versions of its main character, from two different realities! I cannot wait to see how that's going to pan out.

Especially since The Man In The Wall finally makes an appearance in person, emerging unexpectedly

TENNO SURVIVORS

Who's Left Standing After The New War?



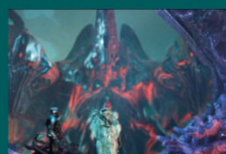
NARMER EMPIRE

Rebecca confirmed that we haven't seen the last of the new Narmer Empire, even with arch villain Ballas gone.



ALL THE OLD FACTIONS

The Grineer, Corpus, and Infected are all still kicking around while recovering from the events of *The New War*.



HUNHOW

The ancient Sentient didn't side with his kin, and while his body remains in the oceans of Uranus, his influence still extends far and wide.



PARVOS GRANUM

Founder of the Corpus, who used the void to survive for millennia, didn't show up during *The New War* but is active with Vala Glarios.



THE MAN IN THE WALL

This enigmatic fella appears in *The New War*, a sign that he's about to reveal the mysterious goal he's been working on.



from the void for a moment in the quest's closing moments. It was a moment that had my jaw hitting the floor at such a 'what the hell is this?!' reveal. "Unforgettable is what you want in your videogame," Rebecca says proudly. "And I think we hit it in that scene."

While there's little known about this entity, the giant statue that appears shows a hand with a missing index finger... something which ties up with the giant mummified finger that powers the player's Railjack spacecraft and also alluded to in the story of Albrecht Entrati, who recounts his first expedition into the void which ends with him closing the portal on a doppelgänger of himself, which severed its fingers. Does he need the Tenno to escape, or does something keep him trapped? Or are his goals even more elusive?

IDENTITY CRISIS

These wild twists and mysteries are secondary to the core of *The New War*'s story, which focuses on the journey of the Lotus, the guardian of

the Tenno, formerly a Sentient named Natah who partly assembled her personality from fragments of Margulis, who helped create the Tenno. Her struggle between three conflicting identities and roles is the centrepiece of *The New War*, with the Operator competing against Ballas and the Sentient leader Erra, to guide her towards one identity or another.

Only by realising they too may be imprinting on them and letting go of the need for their guardian, does the Operator allow the Lotus to forge her own identity, as she once did for them. By contrast, when Ballas is confronted with the possibility he cannot control her, he decides, "If I can't have you, nobody can"... by uh, exploding the sun and wiping out the entire solar system. This larger than life sci-fi story might seem outlandish, but it anchors itself in poignant human drama. A toxic relationship can feel world endingly destructive. The sci-fi elements just heighten the very personal elements. Rebecca describes it as "human conflict in a post-human world". Badass space ninjas are ultimately exposed as teenagers, struggling for freedom and a sense of self. Lotus, is in turn shown to be a woman who chose to pursue her own purpose against the judgement of her people and enemies. By protecting the very weapons she was tasked to destroy, she flew in the face of all logic but it was a decision that truly set her free. "One of the most important parts of *The New War* is ensuring that the conflict remains as human possible to make players understand their role in the story."

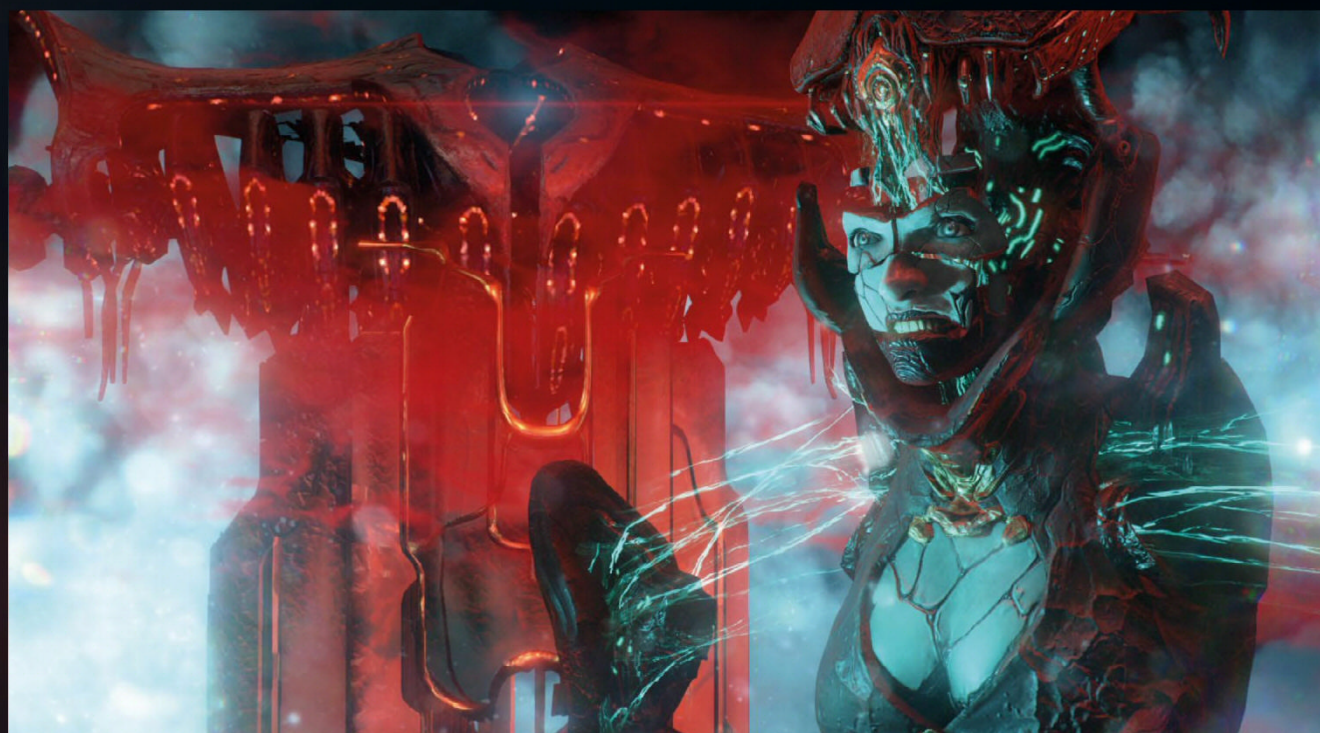
At the end of the quest players help her settle on an identity from a choice of three: Lotus, Margulis, Natah. None of these are framed as right or wrong, only a choice. That freedom to define herself and to have self expression is the same as the Operator's, the scenes mimicking key moments in their journey.

NATAH GAIN

The New War's closing cutscene contains a shot of the Operator carrying the Lotus, an image that's a role reversal where the Lotus once carried the Operator to safety. "Two years ago... there was a pitch that had *The New War* ending with the Operator carrying the Lotus, and two years ago I knew that *had* to be the ending," Rebecca told me, citing it as her favourite moment of the update. "When I saw it happen and played connect the dots that this was the role reversal from *The Second Dream*, I knew it would live in my mind as my favourite part." The relationship between these two characters has come full circle. It's a beautiful little moment of harmony, expressing the value of supporting each other's self discovery. "It felt like such an important closure on that arc."

While it's a satisfying conclusion to this chapter of *Warframe*, Digital Extremes are promising more for 2022, starting with *The Angel of the Zariman* update which launches early this year, taking players back to the Zariman Ten Zero. "It intentionally serves to prologue what's to come." I can't wait to see how much bigger and stranger *Warframe* is going to get from here. ■

BELOW: Some of *Warframe*'s iconic moments were turned on their head.





CUSTOM GAMING

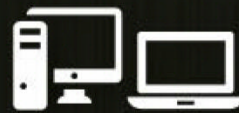
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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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MMO money

We've got a lot of huge, long-awaited games in this month's reviews section, from the sprawling strategy of *Total War: Warhammer III*, to the zombie-dodging parkour of *Dying Light 2*, to the tactical alien-sniping of *Rainbow Six: Extraction*. So it's a bit weird to note that the smash hit of the month is the one I'd barely heard of before we got review code: Korean MMO *Lost Ark*. Its over-the-top RPG action has taken the internet by storm, sucking half the PCG team into its energetic orbit, and it's showing no signs of slowing down. And the oddest thing about that is, because Amazon is publishing it in the West, and with the continued success of *New World*, Big Jeffy Bezos is now reaping the rewards of the two biggest MMOs on Steam right now. Who'd have seen that coming even two years ago, when *Crucible* was dying on its arse?

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR

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LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's parkouring, power-sliding reviews



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
The 10 Toed Surprise
Currently playing
Dying Light 2
This month
Learned that Techland has 50 different words for 'kick'.



NAT CLAYTON
Specialist in
The daily grind
Currently playing
OlliOlli World
This month
Did some real skating alongside her review. Or she would have if it wasn't raining.



TYLER WILDE
Specialist in
Aging gracefully
Currently playing
Sifu
This month
Lost ten years of his life every time he died to a boss. A deadline'll do that to you.



FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Mutating
Currently playing
Total War: Warhammer III
This month
Embraced Nurgle, until his dog got the runs. Get well soon, Cosmo.



MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Goo management
Currently playing
Rainbow Six: Extraction
This month
Gave an alien invasion a good old fashioned welcome to earth.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Wellness
Currently playing
Lily's Well
This month
Wrote an in-depth report delving into the hole story of well-based gaming.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Crunchy chicks
Currently playing
Fable Anniversary
This month
Did a whole page about *Fable* without a single Chicken Chaser joke.

NIGHT CITY

DYING LIGHT 2 is bigger and better than the original

By Christopher Livingston

I land a flying kick into a bandit and send him screaming off the edge of a roof and onto the zombie-filled streets below. In *Dying Light 2* this has become my singular goal: kick dudes off roofs. The city is in peril, I have a half-dozen unfinished sidequests in my journal, and my map is littered with icons imploring me to scavenge resources, discover new locations and undertake parkour challenges.

Apologies. I can't actually deal with any of that right now. Somewhere in the city another bandit is standing too close to the edge of another rooftop and he needs booting off it. And reaching that rooftop is just as much fun as kicking someone off it.

To get there I slide down ziplines and bounce off jump-pads, swing like Spider-Man from the rope of my grappling hook, sail through the air with my fold-up paraglider – or I just climb, clamber, wall-run and ledge-grab my way there. *Dying Light 2* is a huge and exhilarating playground for crunchy, kinetic, two-footed combat and satisfying first-person parkour. It doesn't start out like that – there's a few long hours before the game really opens up and gets fun, and there's a lot of not-so-great storytelling along the way. But it's worth it.

PILGRIM-DARK

Welcome to the European city of Villedor, a sprawling mess of decaying and crumbling buildings with scores of zombies shambling through the streets and pockets of survivors camped out in barricaded safe zones. As Aiden, a travelling do-gooder (called a pilgrim), I've arrived in search of my long-lost sister, Mia, following several convenient flashbacks that show we were the

victims of medical experiments as children before being separated. After discovering a vaccine for the original zombie virus, scientists continued messing around until they goofed big-time and unleashed an even deadlier version of the disease upon the world. One particularly evil scientist, a man named Waltz, may hold the key to finding my long-lost sister and my long-delayed revenge.

A huge playground for crunchy, kinetic, two-footed combat

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person open world parkour action game set in the zombie apocalypse

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Techland

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Co-op

LINK
dl2.dyinglightgame.com

To find Waltz, I need to ingratiate myself with the locals, who are distrustful of outsiders and only give out information in exchange for favours, though thankfully those favours often involve kicking jerks off rooftops. There are two main factions in Villedor – the Survivors, a grubby yet hearty clan who build little farms and safe zones on the rooftops, and the Peacekeepers, who dress in blue combat gear and act like the cops of the apocalypse. When Aiden arrives the two groups are at odds owing to the recent unsolved murder of a Peacekeeper commander, and it's not long before Aiden's eager-to-help attitude gets him wrapped up in the drama between the factions.

I'm not yet a dynamo of flying kicks and fluid parkour when I arrive in Villedor. I'm a complete klutz, a disgrace to the art of climbing walls and running on rooftops. The first few hours of *Dying Light 2*'s feel shaky, slow, and clumsy – I miss my jumps frequently, hesitate at the ledge of every building before leaping, frequently run out of stamina while climbing and hammer away at zombies with ineffectual weapons like table legs and baseball bats. Progression is slow: every enemy I kill and wall I climb sends a trickle of combat and parkour XP into my bank, and only once I've levelled up those talents am I given a single point to unlock a new move from the two skill trees available.

FEET FIRST

Along with my beloved flying two-footed kick, there's more fun foot-related skills: a vault kick, which lets me use a stunned foe as a springboard to launch myself, boots-first, into his comrade (and if my kick stuns him I can simply turn around and springboard back to deliver another kick to the first guy). An air kick lets me target a foe from above, leap down, and drive my foot into his face in glorious slow motion. There's a satisfying headstomp for

TIME CRIMES

How I spend time in cutscenes

35%

TAPPING

I am no longer interested. Tapping the spacebar to skip.

20%

TAKING PUNCHES

A lot of people punch Aiden in cutscenes. A lot.



FORGETTING

In cutscenes Aiden often forgets about zombies. What's that noise? It's a zombie, Aiden.

GETTING KNOCKED OUT

And waking up somewhere else.

LISTENING

The people have lots to say, and I'm interested. Sort of.

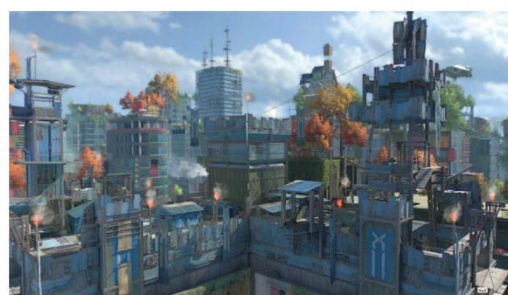
Nighttime, and dark places, bring out the really mean zombies.



Stick mods onto weapons to make attacks even deadlier.



LEFT: Pick up some lore at a local storytelling spot.

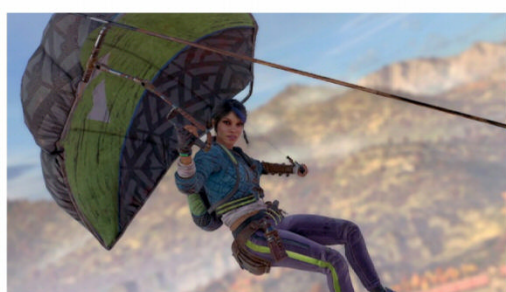


Make friends, or enemies, depending on your choices.



ABOVE: Not all zombies shuffle around slowly. Some are quite energetic.

FAR RIGHT: There are lots of things happening in the street besides zombie mobs.



There's not much left of the military, but they have a plan.

» mashing a fallen enemy's brains into goo, and even a move that lets me run right into a dude, knock him off a roof and ride his body all the way to the ground, smashing his skull into the pavement. I know, it's not a kick, but it's still an awesome (and hilarious) finisher and a stylish way to get down to street level.

Parkour progression doesn't feel quite as great as adding new combat skills or weapons – at first. It focuses on more practical needs like being able to roll after hitting the ground, or popping back up immediately after landing, or skills that let you leap a bit further or climb a bit quicker. But those skills add up and eventually make movement much more fluid, and me much more confident. Being able to slide through a low gap instead of ducking and walking under it never actually saved my life, but it sure as hell feels good. The city eventually begins to feel less like a bunch of obstacles and more like a jungle gym, and a slick, unbroken run across a district's rooftops makes me feel almost superhuman.

There are more tools to navigate the city that only arrive about halfway through the main story quests, like the paraglider I can use to sail over rooftops, steering into updrafts from air vents to extend my flight and open up an exciting new avenue of travel. It's also the perfect way to escape clawing zombie mobs. Eventually I get a grappling hook, too, not a *Just Cause*-type for yanking myself through the air but one I can sink into an object above me and swing across gaps with like Indiana Jones. With all of these tools in play Villedor becomes a brilliant playground, a massive, zombie-filled puzzle I can solve by climbing, leaping, gliding, and swinging, whether I'm on a quest or just exploring the environment.

CLUB ZED

I haven't really mentioned the zombies much because, well, they're a bit boring and fighting them isn't nearly as much fun as mixing it up with living humans. Some zombies shamle slowly, some swarm quickly, and there are zombie specials, like howlers who attract mobs, spitters who pelt with ranged

attacks, lurching blobby ones who explode, and enormous, slow-moving tanks that ground-pound and windmill with giant fists. In the daytime they rarely feel like much of a threat once I've gotten good at parkour, but as in the original *Dying Light*, nighttime changes everything.

When night falls traversing the city becomes incredibly dangerous as all the zombies who avoid daylight head out onto the streets, much meaner and faster than their daytime counterparts. But night also means the interiors of buildings are easier to navigate since most of

the hordes are outside. Nighttime activities reward you with more loot and increased XP, so it's a real risk-vs-reward prospect. It's also a fantastic way to add tension. Creeping past slumbering zombies who might wake up at any moment or scuttling across rooftops hoping I don't do anything to make noise and alert the mob always has me holding my breath. And finishing up a long mission and realising night has nearly fallen is a real oh-shit moment, followed by a mad dash to a safe zone as warning bells sound across the city and the howls of the undead begin rising in my ears. Parkour while panicking is the true test of your skills.

The city is massive, filled with activities and random encounters



CONTROL POINTS

Along with the tools to navigate the city, there's a system to change it too. Throughout Villedor's many districts are buildings to conquer like water towers and electrical substations.

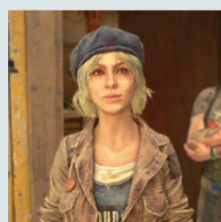
Then you'll have to decide if you want to give control of the building to the Peacekeepers or the Survivors. Your choice results in adding something to turn the city streets into a playground of traps – car bombs you can detonate, turrets that fling sawblades, exploding lanterns, electrical and pendulum traps – all great if you love dramatically wiping out mobs of zombies on street level. If you're more into parkouring far above the zeds you can add more ziplines, jump pads you can bounce up to the roofs with, airbags you can grab and ride to the ground, extra air vents for your glider, and other parkour-related features that make navigating the city quicker and easier. Your choices shape the city into the type of playground you want.

Before launch developer Techland said *Dying Light 2* would take players 500 hours to fully complete, not just the main story quests but sidequests, challenges, activities, secrets, etc. After playing I almost believe it. *Dying Light 2* is a big game, y'all. The city is massive, filled with activities and random encounters and rooftop skirmishes, and even with a glider and other parkour toys just crossing a single district takes ages. Villedor is even bigger than a cursory glance of the map suggests because there are regions that sprawl well outside the borders. After finishing the story I ran along the edge of a district and discovered there's an underwater portion of the city I didn't even know existed. This game is huge.

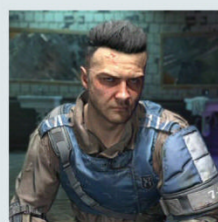
After the 50 hours it took me to complete the main quest, about a dozen sidequests, and a bunch of other activities, I still have plenty to do in *Dying Light 2*, and I'm keen to keep playing. Hell, even after wrapping up the story there are still a bunch of skills I haven't unlocked, quests I haven't begun, and large sections of the city I've barely set foot in – not to mention plenty of bandits I've yet to set foot on. ■

FRACTURED FACTIONS

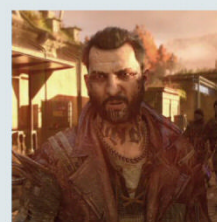
The different groups of Villedor



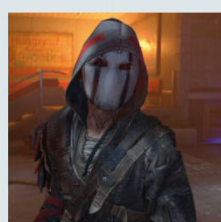
SURVIVORS
Grubby but earnest. They want the city to be free.



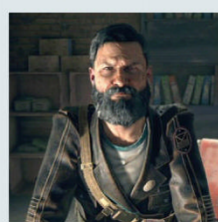
PEACEKEEPERS
Cops of the apocalypse. Looking to impose order.



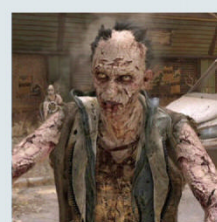
BANDITS
They steal and kill. They run away, too, and are fun to chase.



RENEGADES
Organised bandits looking to expand their turf.



COURIERS
They just want to deliver the mail. You can help!

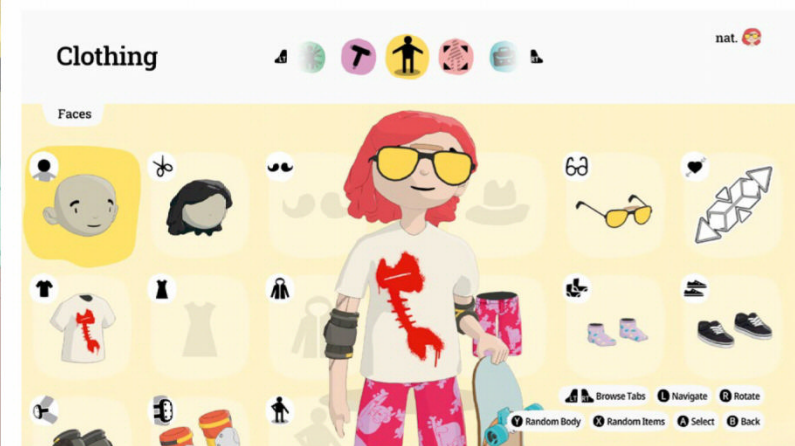


ZOMBIES
Their key policy is biting you. They have a point.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Dying Light 2 has an underwhelming story but boasts a massive, exciting sandbox of parkour and combat.

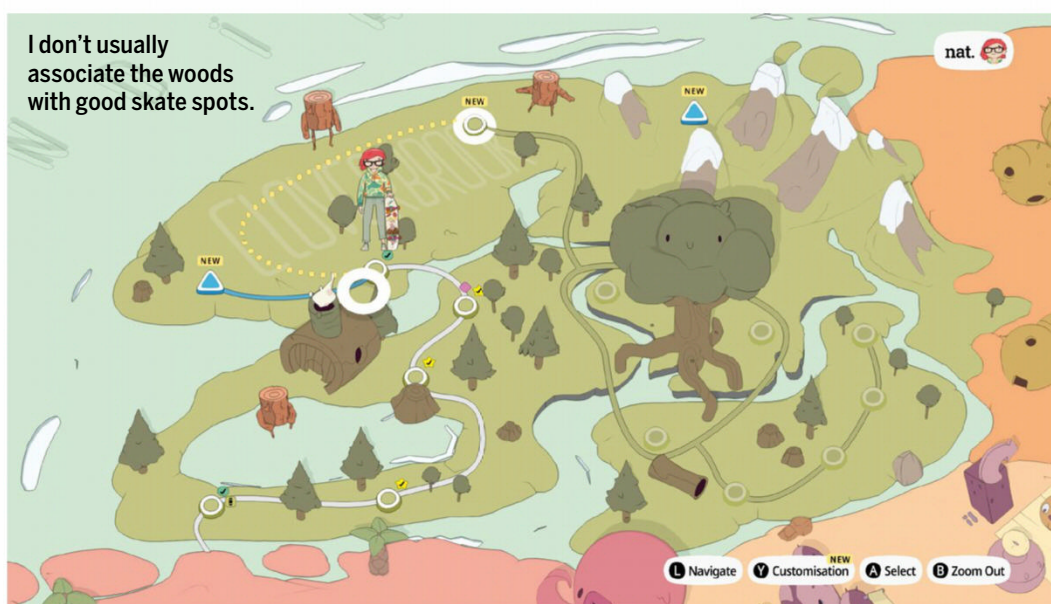
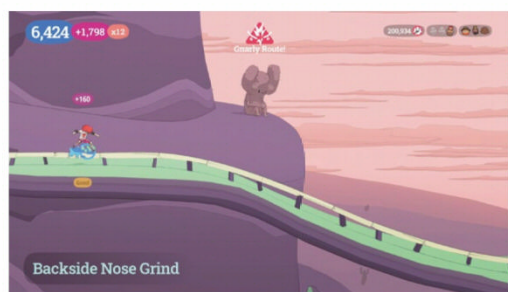
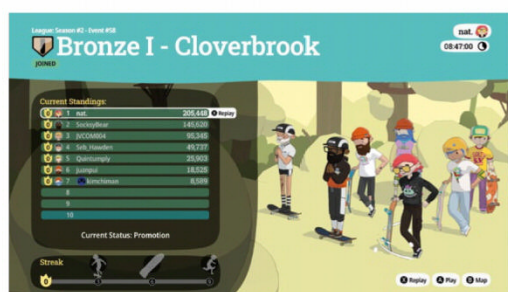
84



RIGHT: Battle to be the best on your board every day.

BELOW RIGHT: This prickly fella just likes to watch.

BELOW: Gnarvana is an endless, dreamlike skatopia.



FRESH STYLE

OLLIOLLI WORLD is a radical refresh for the sidescrolling skater

By Nat Clayton

OlliOlli World isn't like other skaters. It's not shredding lines down some asphalt concourse, pissing off security guards and scaring passing shoppers as it slams a 50-50 into the kerb. Roll7's series of sidescrolling skaters has instead travelled to the far-off shores of Radlandia, a skater's paradise where the rails are always polished and aspiring shredders compete for the chance to become the next Skate Wizard.

OlliOlli World is weirder and wilder than those who Olli'd before it – and it's all the better for it.

The third game in the series follows the template laid out by

OlliOlli 1 and 2. You're tasked with skating a line down a sidescrolling course, using A to push and the left stick to launch into kickflips and the like. As you go on you build up your bag of tricks, chaining combos with manuals, grinds and wallrides as you look to not only finish stages, but finish them in style.

OlliOlli World loves skateboarding – not just the tricks and flips, but the culture, the fashion and the music, which in 2022 means more chillhop beats than thrash punk and ska. But it doesn't feel absolutely beholden to the idea of what skateboarding culture needs to look like. While

OlliOlli 1 and 2 sported a recognisable set of sidewalks to shred, World uses those touchstones to create a wonderfully surreal Adventure Time-esque skatopia.

It's a much-needed tonal refresh for the series, and one that plays perfectly into a new-found third dimension. Skate lines weave around cliffs, abandoned casinos, and massive ice cream cones. Switching from

flat backdrops to a world with real depth doesn't just make World a prettier game – it gives Roll7's designers much more space to challenge your skate skills.

OlliOlli World's stages now shift back and forth, looping around on themselves with quarter pipe gaps and destructible floors that open new routes. This new freedom is best explored in tough new Gnarly

More laid-back and approachable than past games

IT'S CALLED FASHION

Look it up

1 HOBOLOGO NAVIGATORS

Keep the sun out your eyes while stuntin'.

2 WORKSHOP PUFFER

Make an impression with a bold, bulky silhouette.



3 DROWN TOWN BOARD

What's a skater without a suitably gnarly deck graphic?

4 GREY PADS

There's nothing less stylish than skinned knees.

5 SHIBA INU SHORTS

When at the beach, do as the beach-goers do.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Skateboarding as a sidescrolling platformer

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Roll7

PUBLISHER
Private Division

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2070, 16GB RAM,
AMD Ryzen 5 3600

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/34IW9Tr

Routes. Take the right turn and you'll be pulled down a harder path, demanding more precise jumps and tricks at a faster pace, with the promise of more stylish rewards.

EASY ROLLING

That said, OlliOlli World has taken great care to make its particular style of skating feel more laid-back and approachable than past games – at least for the first few stages.

More punishing elements have been removed in favour of offering higher score bonuses. But levels also feel more laid-back at first, and new elements are doled out so gradually that you'll still be getting tutorials well into the third or fourth region out of the game's five total.

Each map has its own leaderboards, and revisiting a stage will assign you a rival to face off against. But that's a lot of stages to battle over – and while I'm sure there'll be folks competing for these spots, Gnarvana is where most challenge-seekers will get their fix.

Unlocked after beating the first region, Gnarvana is a mystical space that lets you generate and share tracks by choosing their difficulty, length and biome. Being cobbled together from proc-gen parts they miss the bespoke appeal of the main stages, but it's also where World's Daily Challenges exist – spewing out a new track every day to fight over.

World's pivot to a gentler learning curve may risk putting off series die-hards, but skateboarding games are in the midst of a renaissance. World's radical reinvention doesn't just help it keep up with this pack of new skaters – it's just what the series needed to spawn one of the most stylish, satisfying skaters around. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A fresh new style and smoothed out lines make OlliOlli World an unmissable skate-'em-up. And that's just gnarly.

86

DUEL INTENTIONS

YU-GI-OH! MASTER DUEL brings the legendary card game into the esports age

By Donald Borenstein

Yu-Gi-Oh! at one point was nearly as ubiquitous as Pokémon, but what was once a simple collectible card game where you'd summon one monster and set a couple traps now regularly involves ten minute turns. It's extremely complicated, but the basic appeal of TCGs remains: the agony and ecstasy at the intersection of skill and luck.

After years of exploitative Yu-Gi-Oh! gacha games, buggy efforts at multiplayer, and anime tie-ins that were fun but more targeted at kids, *Yu-Gi-Oh! Master Duel* has dragged the card game into the free-to-play PvP age far more elegantly than anyone could have expected. The learning curve will be rather steep for any newcomers and there isn't really much of an offering outside of the competitive ladder mode (though this seems likely to change in the near future). But despite all that, it's still one of the best digital card games available today.

For new or lapsed players, Solo mode is an effective tutorial for the game's mechanics, unafraid to let you lose while unfolding feature after feature in a path that largely mirrors the progression of the Yu-Gi-Oh! card game over the past 20 years. The meat of the game is the competitive

ladder. Rather than the traditional best-of-three format that makes up in-person and remote Yu-Gi-Oh! tournament play, these duels are settled with one match. This obviously simplifies things, but it

does mean you can get blindsided by one-turn-kill decks, troll decks, or bad luck – as such, a lot of deck building right now is tilted towards jamming in game-breaking tech cards that are too hard to respond to unless

you specifically build your deck around countering them.

The biggest problem is that, while *Master Duel* feels very fast compared to fan-run simulators like *EDOPro* and *Dueling Book* – which used to be all we had – Yu-Gi-Oh! is still an inherently slow game, made slower by the online experience. You have 400+ seconds for each player's turn initially, and you get most of it back with each new turn. With Yu-Gi-

Special praise has to be given to the spectacular soundtrack

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT?**
A way to play the Yu-Gi-Oh! TCG online
- EXPECT TO PAY**
Free-to-play
- DEVELOPER**
Konami Digital Entertainment
- PUBLISHER**
In-house
- REVIEWED ON**
Nvidia GTX 1060 6GB, AMD Ryzen 7 3700X, 32GB RAM
- MULTIPLAYER**
Yes
- LINK**
bit.ly/3uQm5ap

Oh!'s complexity, it can't be helped, but it makes for long matches.

If you come to accept the over-the-top card game that *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is, however, *Master Duel* has some of the finest production flourishes I've ever seen in a competitive deck building game. The animations can drag out the already slow turns a bit, but they're so entertaining that I have yet to turn them off. Special praise has to also be given to the spectacular orchestral soundtrack.

POT OF GREED

Free-to-play CCGs are, at best, an exercise in friendly extortion. *Master Duel*, at least up front, is surprisingly generous, and it is possible to build a competitive deck for free, although it'll require planning.

One thing the game doesn't explain very well is that whenever you open a pack with a Super or Ultra rare card, you unlock a 'secret pack' containing all the cards from its archetype. From there, you can then open packs to build a deck focused on your strategy, but the pack is only available for 24 hours. While being able to focus on cards you want to unlock is great, the time limit feels like an unnecessary and arbitrary restriction to pressure players to shell

DECK THE HALLS *Our top picks for decks you can work towards for free*



ELDLICH
A trap-heavy control deck centred around the powerful Eldlich, the Golden Lord, this deck grinds the game to a halt, running multiple floodgates.



VIRTUAL WORLD
An affordable deck that can flood the field quickly and build into multiple powerful boss Synchro and XYZ monsters, including True King of All Calamities.



SKY STRIKER
A deck focused on quick link summons and powerful spells, Sky Striker is a deck that chips away at your opponent, while using its power to access traps.



PHANTOM KNIGHTS
Phantom Knights use a lot of graveyard effects to extend plays and build into XYZ monsters, breaking your opponent's board and in some builds even shutting them out.



MEGALITH
A deck that you can build with very little gem investment thanks to the Megalith solo chapter. Megaliths summon on your opponent's turn to disrupt their board.



INVOKED SHADDOLL DOGMATIKA
A deck that has thrived in multiple formats in the paper card game, this blend of three archetypes uses fusion monsters to limit summons.

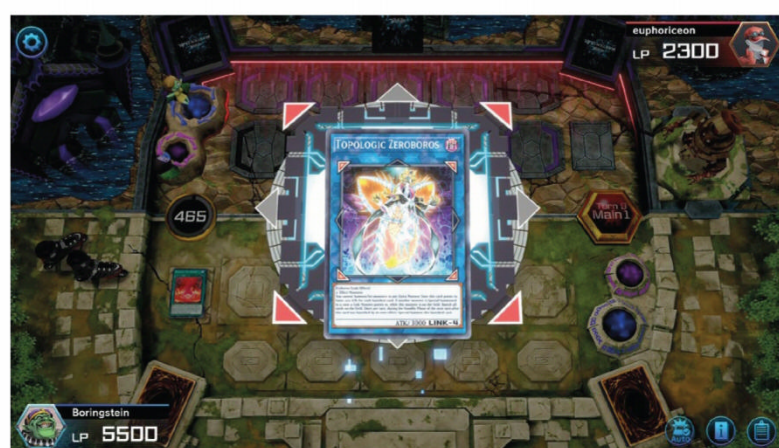
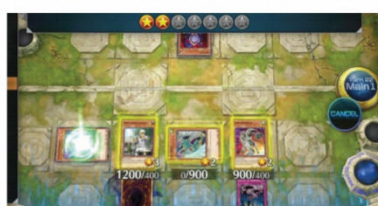


Konami put a lot of effort into making pack openings look cool.



TOP: Master Duel makes card games feel massive in scope.

ABOVE: It's easy to spend time in the deck-building screen.



ABOVE: Boss monster summoning animations are intense.

out real-world money and that doesn't sit quite right.

Master Duel does have a fairly player-friendly crafting system using its other in-game collectible currency, card parts, but I did eventually end up buying a pack of 2,000 gems for \$12 to finish out my Thunder Dragon deck. And oh boy, does Konami ever try to reel you in: the same level of polish in duelling is present in pack opening, with over-the-top animations and sparkling indications of rarity.

But it's hardly the most egregious free-to-play monetisation out there. Yu-Gi-Oh! Master Duel is a lean but

polished gem of a competitive card battler that channels the storied legacy of the physical card game and its 10,000-plus cards into an accessible package. While it's light on solo activities, it offers a compelling competitive experience, so if you've ever wanted to learn a TCG, this might be the best way to do it yet without (totally) breaking the bank. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

One of the most exciting online CCGs released yet. It could use more singleplayer content, but for PvP, it's tough to beat.

80

BRAWLER REVIVAL

Become a kung fu master in **SIFU**

By Tyler Wilde

Was *Sifu*'s final cutscene worth the frustration I endured to see it? Not really, but at risk of sounding like I'm quoting some misattributed kung fu aphorism, the experience of mastering *Sifu*'s combat is what mattered and I couldn't get enough of it. That's down to some of the most enjoyable melee combat ever – fluid, funny, improvisational – and a devilish structure that taunted me with its contemptible fairness.

Sifu is a singleplayer-only brawler with just five levels, each of which ends in a two-stage boss fight. Except for the final boss' annoying immunity to certain attacks, there are no tricks.

The bosses can all be defeated just like any other opponent, and the opening credits even show you how to fight them. When you make it to the second phase of a boss fight, *Sifu* even restores all your health. It's so charitable that every time I died, I said a few short words of gratitude through my clenched teeth.

You aren't even out of the fight when *Sifu* kills you. Thanks to a magic talisman, the protagonist can be resurrected on the spot, which causes them to age one or more years – the penalty increases each time the talisman is used. That gives you more than ten chances to kill all five bosses

while blowing through the hero's 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s.

OLD BOY

At some point in their 70s, the protagonist will use up the talisman's last charge, and another death will be game over. That's not too big of a deal, because you don't have to beat all five bosses in one run. Once you've reached a level, you can restart it

Beating up bouncers in *Sifu* is exceptionally fun

as many times as you want, always beginning from the lowest age at which you finished the previous level. If you're struggling to beat a boss – the bloodthirsty, demonic museum owner, for instance – one option is to give yourself more leeway by attempting to finish the previous level at a younger age. You might need to replay the level before that level, too, though, and at that point

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A challenging singleplayer brawler inspired by kung fu and martial arts movies

EXPECT TO PAY
£32

DEVELOPER
Slocap

PUBLISHER
Slocap

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-9600K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia RTX 2070 Super

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
sifugame.com

you may as well start from the beginning and grind out some permanent skill unlocks.

That's the devilishness of *Sifu*: when the way forward is too difficult, you can always admit your deficiencies and go back in time to do better, drawing out what would otherwise be a brief experience. Even with unlockable shortcuts, most levels contain a few encounters before you reattempt the boss fight.

I don't know if *Sifu* would be possible before SSD times, because even as it stands I think it takes too long to restart a level, never mind get back to the boss fight. It's about repetition, which makes any and all forced lingering irritating. For instance, there are pointless moments where you've got to listen to an inane line of dialogue and respond before progressing – I do not need to ask what the goddamn three trials are the 30th time I am doing the three trials! – and there are beautiful but strangely long, unpopulated passageways everywhere you go.

It's irritating how compelling *Sifu* is in spite of all that. I can't say that I was exactly happy to beat up the same nightclub bouncer 50 or so times on my way into the second level, but I didn't feel I could accept defeat, either. And at least when my cortisol levels are within a normal range, beating up bouncers in *Sifu* is exceptionally fun.

FLURRY OF FISTS

All of your time in *Sifu* is spent heading toward bosses or fighting them, but they aren't its best fights. The boss battles are all one-on-one bouts, and although I should probably thank the videogame gods that we've been spared a boss who calls in waves of reinforcements, this is one game where that might've actually been good.

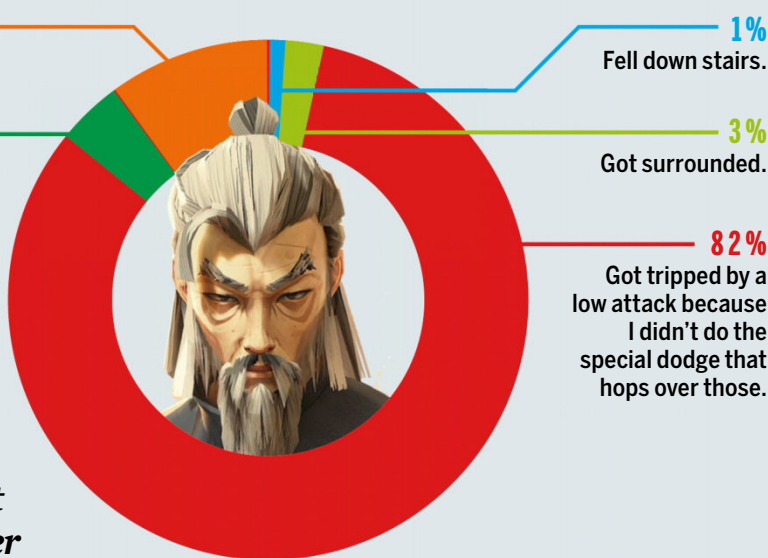
Beating solo enemies in *Sifu* largely involves the same pattern memorisation you can find back in the NES era of gaming, with some

10%
Mistimed a dodge.

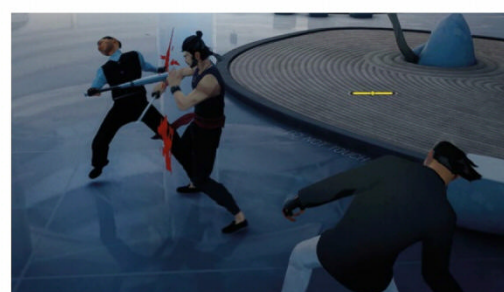
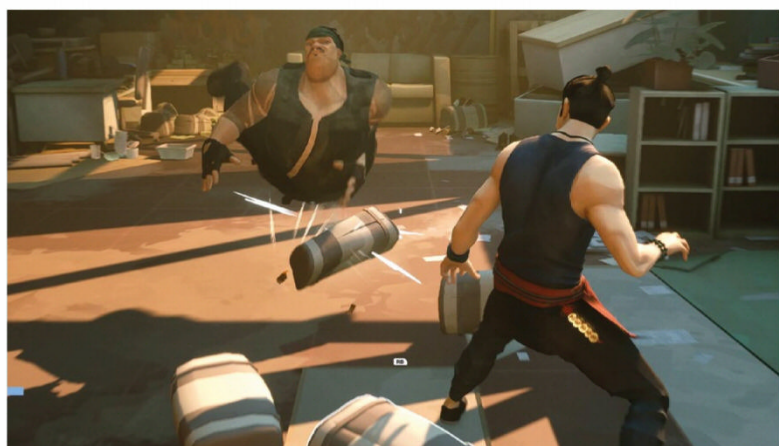
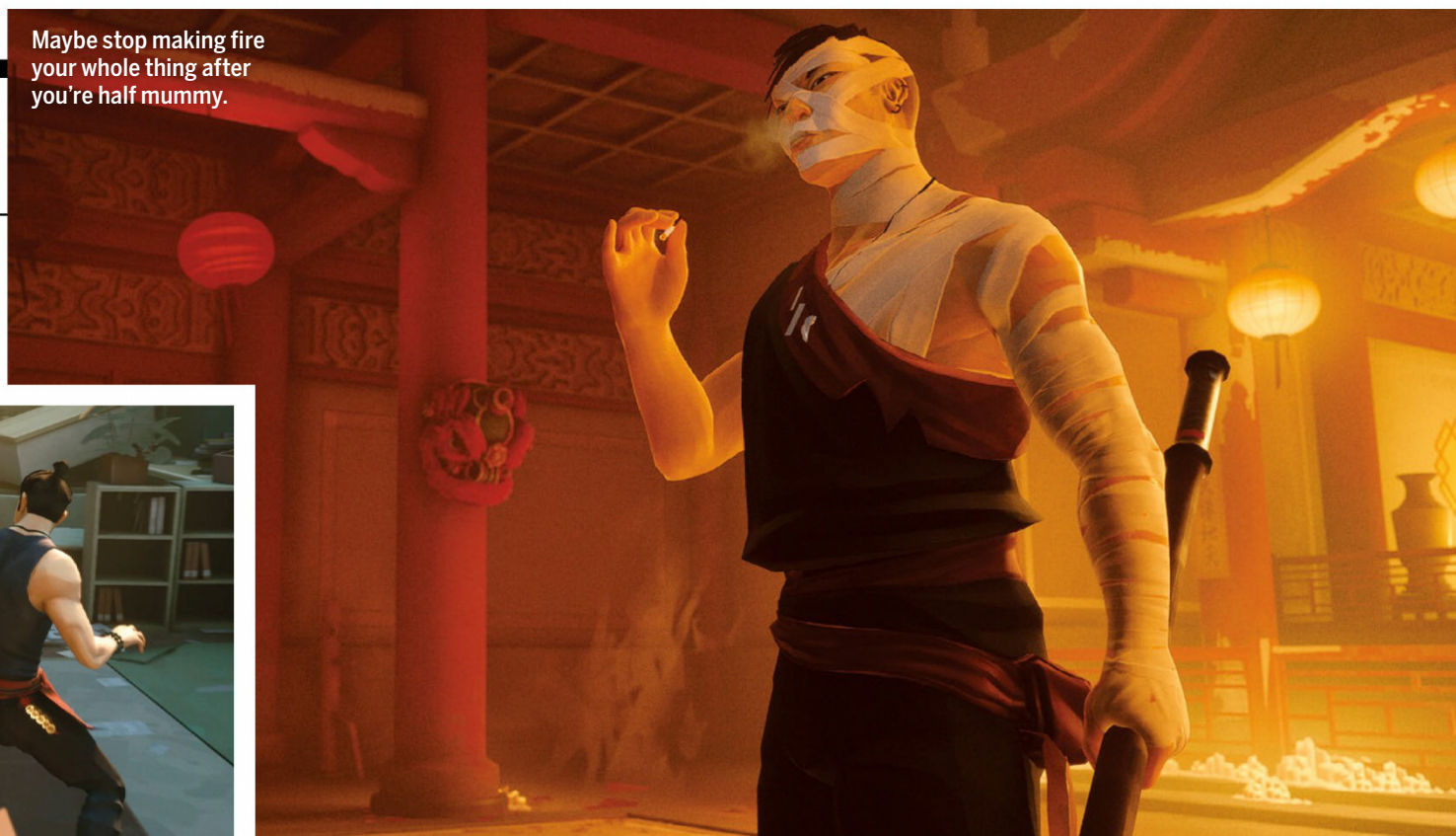
4%
Tried to get all fancy like I'm Tony Jaa or something.

WAYS I DIED

You may find that this chart applies to other games, too



Maybe stop making fire your whole thing after you're half mummy.



FAR LEFT: Shoving enemies off ledges just feels mean.

LEFT: Things get bloody when the swords come out.



Breaking an enemy's 'structure' opens them to a finishing blow.



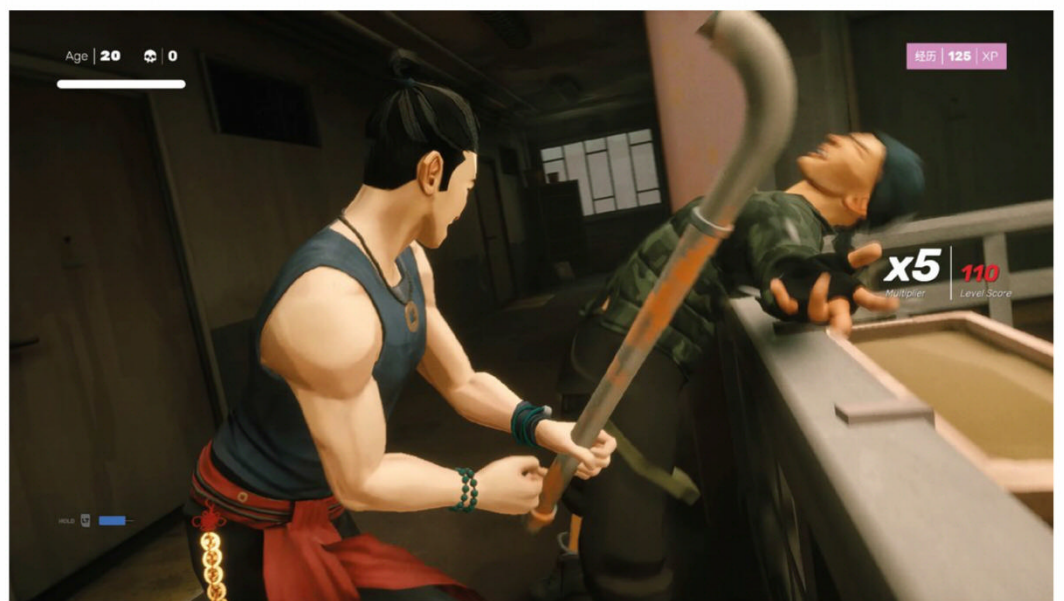
Real challenge: age until you have the best beard, then stay that age.



RIGHT: There's an Oldboy corridor fight early on.



FAR RIGHT: When in doubt, hit someone with a pipe.



Limbs conveniently glow before big attacks.

» variance to keep you on your toes. Inscribing attack patterns into your brain folds is a tried and true form of fun, and I did delight in finally snuffing out each boss, easily dodging combos that once tormented me – even the damned sweeping trip attacks. But *Sifu* shines where memorisation meets improvisation and playfulness, an experience mainly found in the goon-filled rooms on the way to the bosses.

You can produce wildly diverse combinations of kneelings, elbowings, kicks, punches, and throws from just two buttons and an analog stick. (There's keyboard and mouse support, too, but it feels like playing *Rocket League* that way: doable, but weird.) It's fun just to take part in such a stylish display of imagined (but mostly grounded) athleticism, but *Sifu*'s brilliance lies more in defence than offence.

You can slip and roll around and under haymakers, kicks, and grabs, which basic enemies telegraph clearly like the amateurs they are (thanks to *Sifu* being a singleplayer game, it can slow down time to make this easier). It's possible to avoid most attacks that way, and it's enormously satisfying to stand in place dodging every foot and fist and baseball bat that enters your airspace like a pro boxer who outclasses their opponent and definitely knows it.

When everything clicks, all your moves flow together in long brawls that look more like some amazing movie action scene than something you could possibly be controlling. There's a big fight inside the nightclub level that can't be avoided, and so I've done it dozens of times. It's always a little different, but a snippet of it might go something like this: I run in and beat a guy to the floor with a baseball bat, bounce it off someone else's forehead, dodge a punch from behind me and then throw a backhand into their temple without turning around (the charged backfist attack has become one of my favourite unlocks), trip another combatant with a kick and then dodge an incoming punch by kneeling down to hammer them with punches, stand the tripped guy back up and palm strike him over a staircase, sending him tumbling onto the dance floor, kick an ottoman at

another dude to throw out his legs, too, and so on. There's much more you can do in just those five levels.

INTO DREAMS

But the kung fu revenge tale meant to make sense of those levels comes across like someone's poorly-remembered dream. In its otherworldly China, nightclubs,

corporations and medical centres are all run by elusive kung fu masters, a drug lab transforms into a bamboo grove, and a museum elevator leads to a moonlit night. Like so many dreams, the plot probably matters

more to the dreamer than to anyone else, but *Sifu*'s logic can be enjoyably uncanny and its visual effects are fantastic. At one point, waves of golden energy rise from a deep-earth bell, seeming to liquify banded iron ore in the cave walls surrounding you. Rather than *Sifu*'s clumsy dialogue and character barks, I wanted that powerful foreshadowing to be paired with some of Max Payne's noir monologuing, "My future was ringing in my ears..."

Remedy's waking nightmares in *Max Payne* and *Control* do make for a decent point of comparison, but Quentin Tarantino films are really *Sifu*'s nearest comparison. The opening cutscene is reminiscent of O-Ren Ishii's animated origin in *Kill Bill*, and like those movies it's guided in large part by a fascination with cliché and archetype. Martial arts films are the major inspiration for

both, and early in *Sifu* there's a direct nod to the hallway fight in *Oldboy*. That first level doubles as an homage to *The Raid*, taking place in an apartment building strewn with junkies who the protagonist notes aren't a threat, more or less informing us that they're just props.

They're slightly more than that by the end, as the expensive-looking healing centre at the conclusion provides some critical contrast. That connection may say more about the country I live in than China, though. *Sifu*'s point of view on the nation it's set in is hazy. The Paris-based studio worked with Chinese consultants, and its creative director is associated with a French Pak Mei kung fu master, the chosen disciple of master Lao Wei San in Foshan. Reverence for that tradition and lineage is obvious in the school that acts as the protagonist's home base between levels, but the other places come across like *Control*'s Oceanview Motel: not generic, exactly, but locationless. They could be part of the fictional world in Slocap's previous game, *Absolver*.

PRACTICE MAKE PERFECT

What is mainly gained from these kung fu enthusiasts is the mechanical videogame adaptation of a specific style of kung fu. I can't say whether or not the character shows faithful form, but the cohesiveness of the moveset comes through brilliantly. And I did have the experience of 'mastery through practice' that was promised. In that way, *Sifu*'s focus on kung fu tradition is a success, even if the setting and story are mostly just mystifying spectacle.

I wish I had recorded my first blundering advance through the opening stage so that I could see just how far I've come. It's hard to remember being a novice after you've trained so much that you can no longer say exactly how you do it: at this point, I just dodge when it's time to dodge and attack when it's time to attack. That's a lot more complicated to do in the physical world, but 30 hours with *Sifu*'s videogame version can at least get you a heady whiff of kung fu mastery. ■

YOUNG VS OLD

The pros and cons of getting older



YOUNG MASTER

- Has more health.
- Whole life ahead of him.
- Dad was murdered pretty recently though, so that stings.
- Lots of muscles.



OLD MASTER

- Does more damage.
- Wasted whole life beating up gangsters for revenge.
- Still sad about dad anyway.
- Good beard.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The experience of coolly beating up a dozen goons at once is worth enduring *Sifu*'s lows for.

85

FEELING SLUGGISH

NOBODY SAVES THE WORLD is a delightfully silly and inventive dungeon-crawler

By Jon Bailes

Nobody Saves the World puts the grin in grind. DrinkBox's dungeon-crawler isn't ashamed of its XP farming demands, and won't let you quickly mainline its story without them. But neither is it harshly traditional, withholding challenges until you've eaten your greens, with occasional stat boosts to demonstrate the nutritional benefits. Rather, it asks, what if the grind wasn't a means to an end or an imposition, but satisfyingly playful in itself?

Saving the world feels secondary here to simply enjoying the process. Yes, there's a story, as protagonist Nobody sets out to gather five crystal fragments that will stop a cataclysmic spread of malignant fungus. But as with DrinkBox's previous work, *Guacamelee*, it comes with an ironic nod to genre cliches, and nobody but Nobody is expected to take it seriously.

The star of the show is undoubtedly the main character. Nobody is a plain white cardboard cut-out of a human. But as much as this is a game about the journey more than the destination, it's also about what you become along the way – literally. With the aid of a magic wand, Nobody can transform into a host of animals, beasts, and vocations, calling on their unique skills to beat back the monster hordes.

The heart of *Nobody Saves the World* is in toying with the individual quirks of these forms. There's something wonderfully absurd, for example, about assuming the persona

of a magician in a fantasy world where wizards and magic palpably exist, yanking aggressive bunnies from a top hat. I'm also a big fan of the slug, back-peddalling from enemies to draw them into its slimy trail, slowing them down to be picked off.

Each form begins with a unique signature attack and passive ability, and eventually learns one or two rechargeable special moves. But the real fun begins once you mix and match abilities from different forms. So, you might equip the rat's poison buff on the horse, adding real venom to its kicks. Or maybe you want a turtle that can sneak up and backstab foes, or give your bodybuilder the ability to gallop.

Crucially, all these possibilities are used to ensure that the grind is never merely about watching XP bars fill. Levelling up is tied to 'quests', which include completing dungeons or errands provided by NPCs, but also objectives linked to each form's abilities. The most basic of these

The real fun begins once you mix and match abilities

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A tongue-in-cheek dungeon crawler with a shapeshifting hero

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
DrinkBox Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2070, i7-10750H, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Two-player online co-op

LINK
bit.ly/367Ff10

involve hitting a certain number of enemies with attacks, but they quickly evolve to demand you stack powers and master their nuances.

WORLD WARRIORS

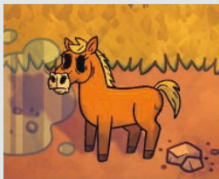
Absorbed in these quests, I was largely content wandering the map, experimenting with various skills. But the overworld is well worth exploring in its own right, tightly plotted with connecting passageways, fields, lakes and underground tunnels, and stuffed with monsters, treasures and amusing distractions.

There are also plenty of dungeons to crawl, and these add extra bite to combat by introducing 'wards' (shields that must be broken by a specific kind of attack) and location-specific rule changes. Yet, while their themes and décor are imaginative, in practice they're quite similar – a series of procedurally generated monster mazes. I would have been happy with fewer of them if each had more distinct content.

The enclosed spaces also tend to expose some haphazard aspects in the game's combat. Generally, it's slick and consistent, but there's no real sense of impact between the characters, and hits don't visibly register other than the numbers that pop up, so when the screen turns into something of a mosh pit, you might struggle to gauge who's winning, or lose yourself amid the chaos.

Mostly, however, *Nobody Saves the World* is a delight. Under the brash exterior lies a wonderfully technical game that offers the freedom to let you discover the quality of its craft at your own pace. Grinding through quests is pleasurable and, well, who doesn't want to be a horse with the powers of a slug? ■

TOP FORMS *Some great picks for causing carnage*



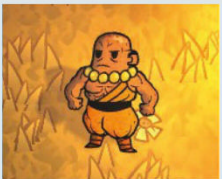
HORSE
Run at enemies backwards to deliver a swift kick, or gallop in head first.



RAT
Nimble, venomous, and toothy, its devour skill also recoups lost HP.



GHOST
Hit foes with a spooky aura that causes pain and scares them witless.



MONK
Pummel enemies and blast them with divine lightning. Fast and powerful.



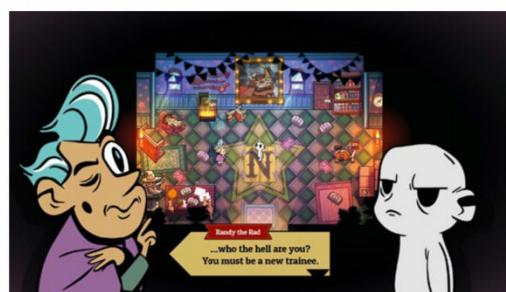
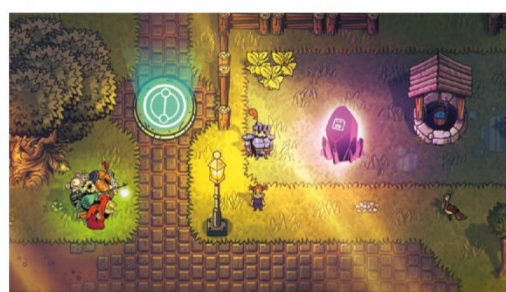
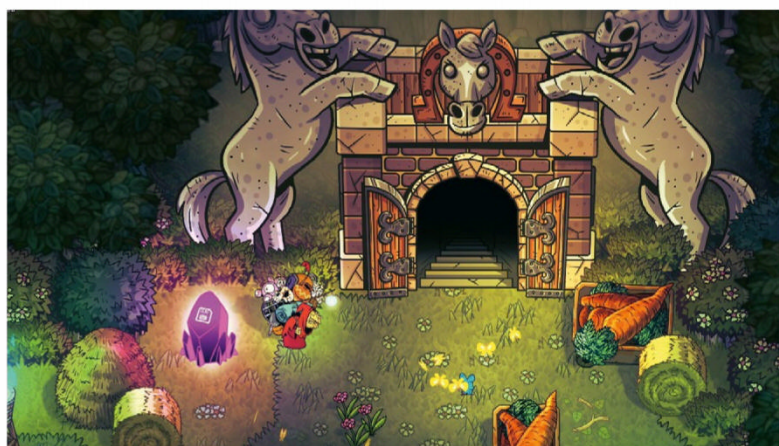
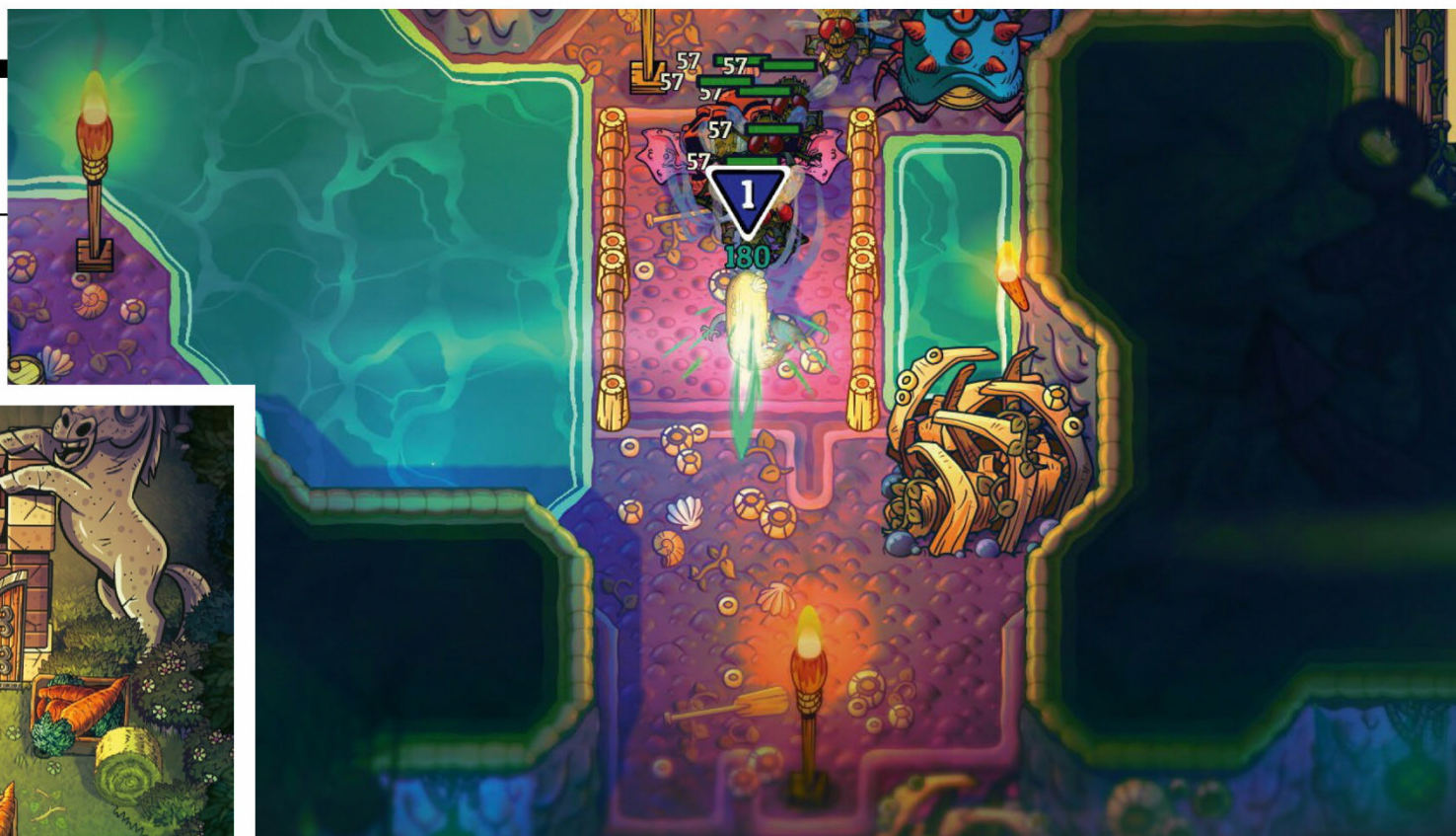
BODYBUILDER
Throw out slow, but incredibly heavy attacks and looks great doing it.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Nobody does it better? Not quite, but *Nobody Saves the World* is a highly entertaining action RPG.

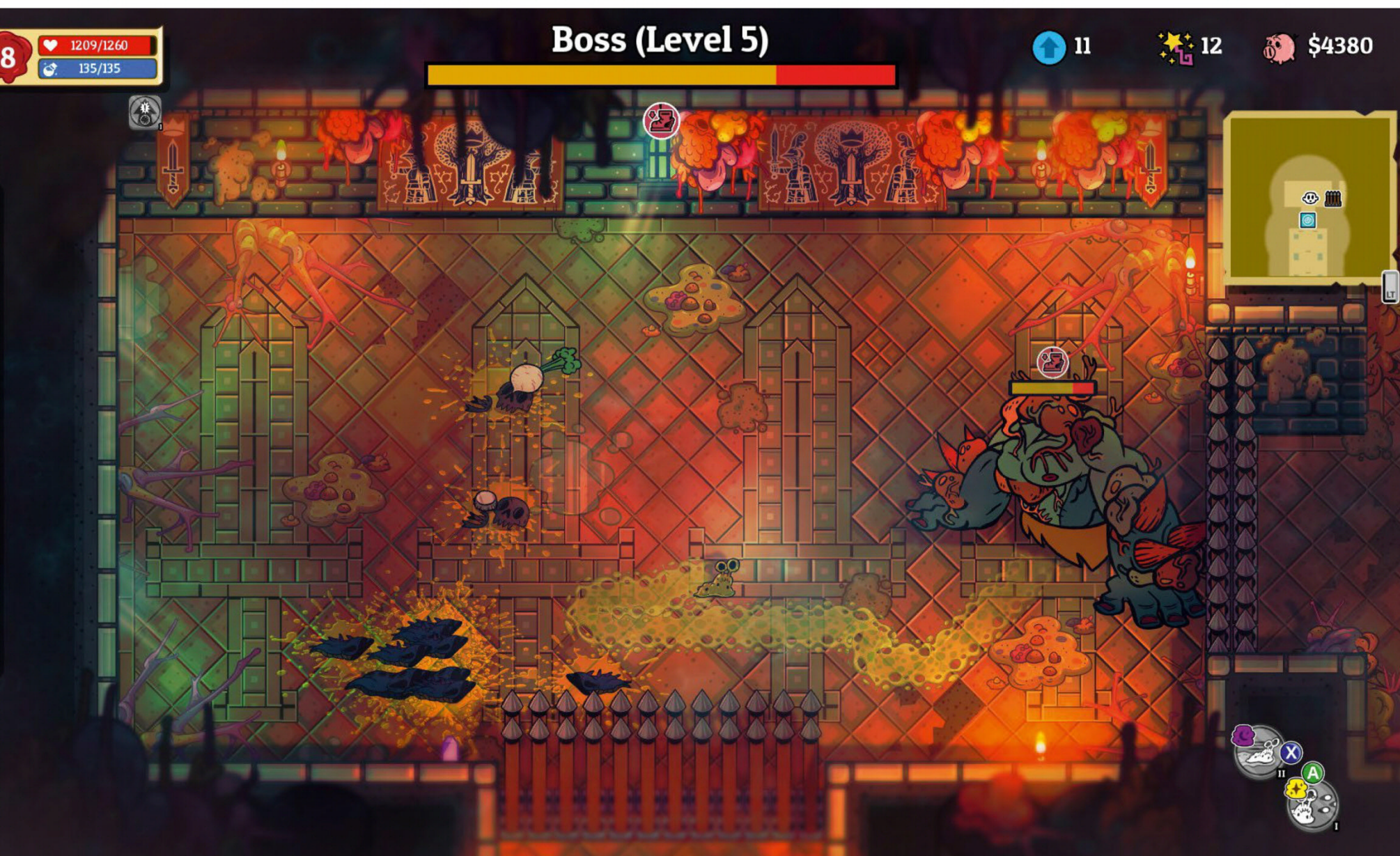
80



LEFT: Special attacks require mana, which you can recharge with regular strikes.

BELOW LEFT: The locals tend to be welcoming, with a few exceptions.

BELOW: Bosses aren't usually too tough, once you find an effective build.



FREE-TO-SLAY

LOST ARK's blend of ARPG and MMO is a (mostly) successful experiment

By Rick Lane

Lost Ark is a game with zero chill. A Korean hybrid of ARPG and MMO, it embodies the best and the worst traits of both genres. Ambitious to a fault, it offers a vast and spectacular fantasy adventure elevated by a stunning combat system and an astonishing sense of scale, although its grand plans are hindered by hackneyed storytelling and a repetitive quest structure.

Right from the off, *Lost Ark*'s mantra is 'why fight one enemy when you can fight 20?' and it gives you the combat skills to facilitate this. You start the game at level ten, with five abilities already unlocked. For the Paladin – the class I spent most of my time with – this includes powers like Spin Slash, a powerful one-two punch of an attack that puts a massive dent in enemy health bars, and Light of Judgement, where your Paladin thrusts his hand forward, emitting a beam of searing light that sends enemies flying back.

The game is structured heavily around these meaty combat skills, to the point that you'll mostly use your standard attack for mopping up stragglers when the fight's already been won. Your powers only become

more impressive as you level up, too. With higher-level powers unlocked, I liked to open-up combat with Wrath of God, a devastating attack. Then I'd mop up any remaining foes with Flash Slash, where your Paladin moves slowly forward, cutting at the air rapidly like an armoured lawnmower.

The approach to questing is like a parody of MMO design

The game's massive MacGuffin hunt of a story is divided into various continents, themselves split into different zones. *Lost Ark*'s approach to questing is like a parody of MMO design. You'll be sent off to kill monsters that respawn so rapidly that it's often quicker to wait for them to reappear rather than explore, while NPCs will ask you to carry objects for them a whole ten yards across the map. It's rudimentary to say the least.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A huge fantasy MMO/action-RPG hybrid with spectacular combat

EXPECT TO PAY
Free-to-play

DEVELOPER
Smilegate RPG

PUBLISHER
Amazon Studios

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600,
Nvidia GeForce 2080
Super, 32 GB RAM

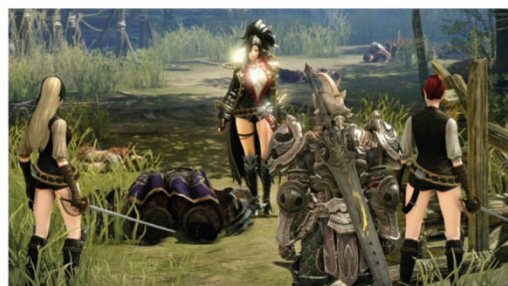
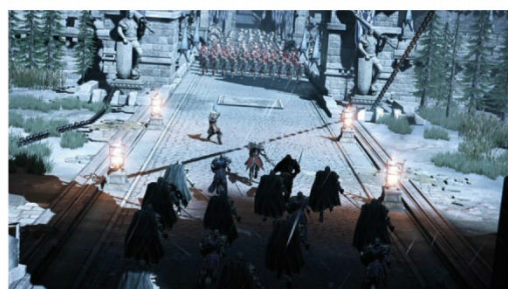
MULTIPLAYER
MMO
LINK
playlostark.com/en-gb

But what *Lost Ark* lacks in depth, it makes up for in efficiency. Quests are designed to push you quickly through the map, showering you with rewards in the process.

Moreover, these quickfire quests build toward larger story arcs. Most zones lead you to a dungeon that can be explored with up to three other players. These dungeons vary wildly, ranging from ancient ruins to pirate coves to catacombs filled with heretic priests. They're wonderful spaces to explore, and unlike the more general zones, aren't populated by constantly respawning enemies, which makes combat a bit more satisfying.

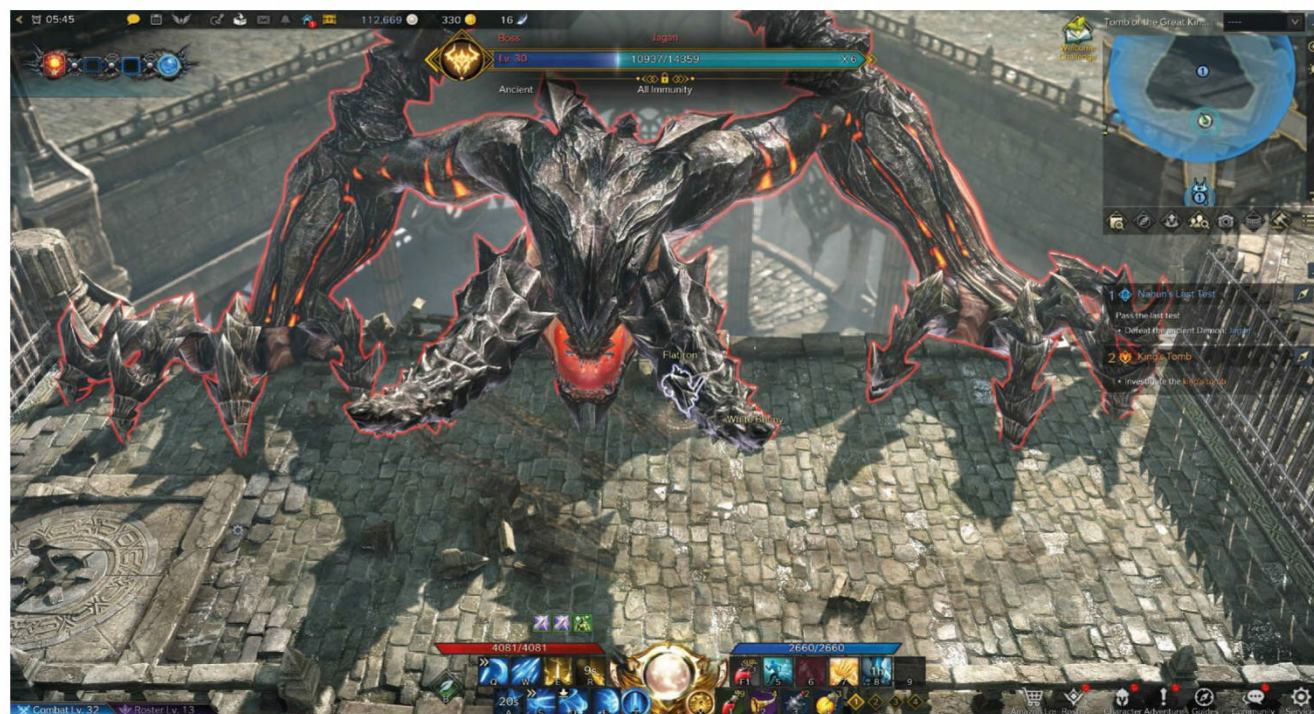
ROYALS WITH CHEESE

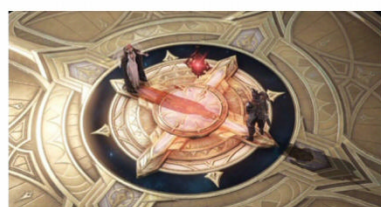
Lost Ark's highest highs, however, come with its major story events. The bulk of the early game takes place on the continent of West Luterra, where you attempt to help the errant King Thirain regain his throne from the usurper Lord Scheritt. The story sees you help Thirain gather his forces through multiple zones, culminating in a colossal castle siege that looks more like something out of *Total War* than an ARPG. And what I've mentioned here is only the start of



TOP: Black Friday, 2049

RIGHT: Bosses are frequent, and massive.





ABOVE: All Ark and no blight.

BELOW: The story's main characters have big 'K-Pop boy band' energy.

what the game contains. Once you reach the end of East Luterra, *Lost Ark* gives you a ship, and sets you off to explore the rest of the game's enormous world.

In sights and sounds, *Lost Ark* is a captivating adventure. Which makes it more of a shame that the main story is simply not that compelling. The central cast of characters are largely one dimensional, a carousel of exhaustingly noble heroes and villains who look like they stumbled through the local S&M club on the way to battle. My other major gripe with *Lost Ark* is that the loot sucks. It's all geared toward incremental stat-upgrades, with precious little that is unique or distinctive, at least along the main story path.

Yet every time I started to brush against *Lost Ark*'s shallower edges, the game would throw some wild scenario at me to hook me back into its depths. The combat alone is reason enough to give *Lost Ark* a go, and its ridiculous scale and many weird tangents succeed in overcoming its flat storytelling and by-the-numbers quests. It's not quite a classic, but I had some fun watching it try to become one. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Excellent combat and a stunning sense of scale help steer *Lost Ark* through its more tired MMO conventions.

78



ACTION ZONES

The zone design is primed toward efficiency. Here's how:

1 Sidequests are picked up near main-quests, and can often be resolved in seconds.

2 Main quest objectives push you into new areas, often completed with a different NPC.



3 'Triports' let you teleport instantly to that location for a small silver cost, helping minimise any required backtracking.

4 Dungeons are placed at the end of the zone, forming the climax of that area.

REVIEW

Total War: Warhammer III



UTTER CHAOS

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III is a bold, experimental final act

By Fraser Brown

It would have been very hard to predict the trajectory *Total War* has taken. It's grown from feudal Japanese battles and a simple board game-style campaign to this, *Warhammer III*, where armies can hop between realities, where daemons and ogres clash, and where troops are led by flying monstrosities – including one that's as customisable as an RPG protagonist.

Creative Assembly has crammed plenty of surprises and oddities into this final act, clearly saving up its strangest experiments for the cataclysmic confrontation between mortals and Chaos. It goes in some strange directions, but always goes big, fully committing to Warhammer's wonderfully over the top brand of fantasy.

The impetus for the conflict is a bearnapping. Ursun, Kislev's hairiest deity, has been imprisoned by the daemon Be'lakor. To make matters worse for the furball, he's also been shot with a cursed bullet by a corrupted Kislev prince. His roars of anguish open up rifts between realities, letting armies cross over to the Realm of Chaos, where they can fight to reach Ursun – some to free him, some to request a boon, and others to steal his power.

It's a setup that leads to a very different style of *Total War* campaign, where conquering the map is still

encouraged but isn't quite as important as reaching Ursun's prison. Every 30 or so turns, rifts open up all over the map, spewing out daemonic armies and inviting mortals to enter *Total War*'s weirdest locations,

culminating in massive survival battles against a daemon prince. The reward? The prince's soul. Collect four and you can unlock the way to the big bear.

Each section of the Realm of Chaos reflects the personality of its god

HELLBOUND

Each section of the

Realm of Chaos reflects the personality of its patron god. Nurgle's realm is a pestilent, toxic nightmare. Slaanesh's realm is a purple-tinged series of rings connected by portals. Tzeentch's realm is a maze of floating islands connected by magic. Khorne's realm is the most straightforward: a hellscape where you simply beat up a lot of daemons and rogue armies until you've earned enough glory.

You'll likely spend around ten turns in each, but they loom over the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sprawling fantasy RTS that serves as the conclusion to the *Total War: Warhammer* trilogy

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER
SEGA, Feral Interactive

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3JyNyBq

whole campaign. You know you're going to need to be ready to jump into the next one, so you need to prepare by rapidly expanding and building the toughest army that you can. But since your best army is going to be in a different reality once the rifts open, you need to make sure your territory is still protected from daemonic invasions.

Things can get hairy, especially when the finish line is in sight. If it looks like another faction is going to get their fourth soul before you, you'll need to act quickly, wiping them out before they get it. If that plan fails, though, you've still got a chance to claw back victory from the jaws of defeat. You need to immediately drop what you're doing and wait for them outside Ursun's prison. Defeat the army, and then you'll have another 15 turns to catch up.

That was one of my biggest concerns before the review: how do you win if you're behind? Beating up your opponents is a nice, straightforward answer, and very *Total War*. But doing this also creates new wrinkles. In my first campaign, I was good friends with Nurgle's main faction. But when we both entered Slaanesh's realm, and it looked like Nurgle's lot were going to beat me to the final battle, I had to make a difficult decision. This wasn't the last soul either of us needed, so I could have let my pal win this round, but did I really treasure our friendship that much? It turns out I did not. I got the soul, but the war against Nurgle lasted for a long time.

It's by far the most unusual and involved campaign Creative Assembly has ever designed, and all this novelty made my first playthrough a treat. It has diminishing returns, however, and now that I'm more familiar with the Realm of Chaos, privy to its nasty bag of tricks, I sometimes resent dragging myself back there when I could be gobbling up settlements, putting it at odds with the sandbox.

DRESS FOR SUCCESS

The many looks of the Daemon Prince



KHORNE

If your look is repping Khorne, you'll be perfectly suited to charging into the fray and tearing up the opposition.



NURGLE

Nurgle gear will make people cross the street to get away from you. And just like the diseases you spread, you're hardy as hell.



SLAANESH

If you're shopping in the same place as Slaanesh, expect to be invited to some parties – the best place to show off your scythe arms.



TZEENTCH

And finally, if you're copying Tzeentch's style, you get to flit around the battlefield as a big, magically-inclined bird.

Total War: Warhammer III

» The same goes for the survival battle at the end of each of them. The wave-based assaults and tower defence elements, which let you spend resources earned in battle on various walls and towers, as well as reinforcements, give these battles such a different feel that I immediately found them compelling, but by my second campaign I started to see past the novelty.

Sure, the vast scale of them continues to impress me, but the tower defence elements are a bit on the thin side. You get access to four types of towers and walls, and a few specific locations where you're allowed to build them. Think they'd be more effective elsewhere? Tough. And even with Creative Assembly trying to create lanes, everything is just too big, too wide, and you never get that sense that you're manipulating the battlefield like you do in dedicated tower defence affairs.

While the survival battles start to lose their lustre after a campaign or two, new modes are very welcome, and the experiment does have a pay-off. Siege battles and the returning minor settlement fights also get these fortifications. These maps typically have a much more elaborate layout than the straight line of survival battles, with bridges and underpasses, plenty of elevation, and loads of places to create chokepoints. There are more ways for them to play out, and while you're still limited to building on predetermined spots, the more dynamic nature of these fights

means that the choice of where and what to build next feels tactical rather than arbitrary.

WILD BUNCH

The bulk of the campaign still takes place on the more conventional sandbox map, some parts of which you'll recognise from the first game – but thanks to *Warhammer III*'s unusual factions, overfamiliarity shouldn't be a problem. The highlight is the Daemons of Chaos faction. Each of the Chaos gods have their own crews, but the Daemons of Chaos, led by the aforementioned

corrupted Kislev prince – now a daemon prince – is a united front, letting you recruit units from the entire pantheon and use each army's unique abilities. The prince's new form is malleable, letting you replace his limbs with new ones earned by dedicating your achievements to specific gods, or to all Chaos.

The prince is also the subject of *Warhammer III*'s excellent prologue and has the most personal connection to the campaign. Between the narrative structure and the astonishing variety of limbs and weapons you can equip him with, playing the Daemons of Chaos is almost like playing a *Total War* RPG. The story of a heroic knight becoming his land's worst nightmare is also extremely evocative of Arthas' fall in *Warcraft III*, a story that's still one of my favourites, so it had a rapt audience. It's the most I've enjoyed a single *Total War* campaign.

When you're playing a Chaos faction, you feel like a force of nature

With the Daemons of Chaos boasting all this flexibility, it does slightly dilute the impact of all the other daemonic factions. But they still have unique characters, starting locations, and objectives that make them distinct enough to be worth taking for a spin. And while they all serve Chaos, they do so in very different ways, from Khorne's take-no-prisoners approach, to Slaanesh's sneaky, seductive ways.

Over time, the presence of these factions, along with the daemonic incursions from the Realm of Chaos, warps the mortal world. Chaos corruption exists in the other games, too, but there's a lot more Chaos in *Warhammer III*, and specific flavours this time. These god-specific brands of corruption all have different effects, slowly choking the lands they spread through, and eventually they start to resemble the domain of the god corrupting them. One day you're ruling over lovely green fields and snow-capped mountains, and the next you've got toxic lakes and hill-sized cysts appearing everywhere, or everything's covered in ash and lava.

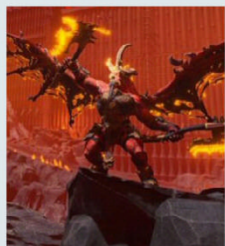
When you're playing a Chaos faction, you feel like a force of nature – especially if you're one of Nurgle's lot, since you can spread a variety of very nasty plagues on top of Nurgle's brand of Chaos corruption. And you're an existential threat to the mortal factions, which is why – with the exception of Chaos-followers like the norseans and skaven – you're in a perpetual state of war with them.

Siding with Chaos is very tempting, then, but their opponents are also a fascinating and varied bunch. With Kislev and Grand Cathay you've got two armies that, at the moment, are unique to *Total War*. Both exist in the periphery and lore of the tabletop game, and until Games Workshop finishes its upcoming Kislev army, this is the only way to get your fix.

Kislev is all about bears and ice magic. Grand Cathay has dragons and trade. I might be underselling them a little bit. I definitely should have mentioned that some of those bears are giant magic bears that tower over everything. And maybe that the aforementioned dragons are actually Grand Cathay's leaders, who can shapeshift in the middle of battle. You're meant to pick your moments and switch between your forms depending on the situation, but if you

COME FOR THE CHAOS

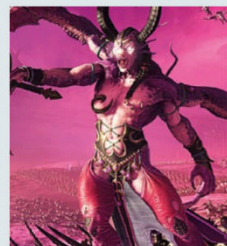
Who are the Chaos gods?



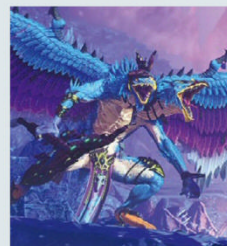
KHORNE
Khorne is obsessed with blood and violence, and his followers like to get drunk on rage and gore, increasing in ferocity with each battle won.



NURGLE
The most grotesque of the Chaos gods, ol' Nurgle and his followers love nothing more than spreading plagues and making everyone vomit up their lunch.

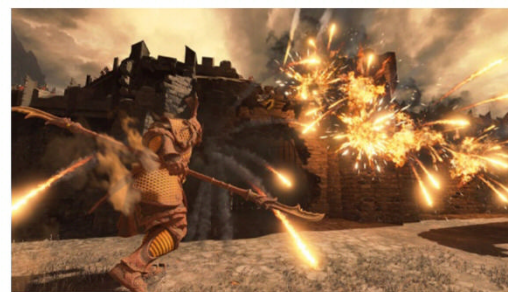


SLAANESH
The horniest of all the Chaos gods, Slaanesh is a seductive force, tempting mortals and keeping S&M shops in business. Don't trust their lies.



TZEENTCH
The god of bird watchers and weird magic, Tzeentch drives people bonkers with his hard to pronounce name and his army of chattering horrors.



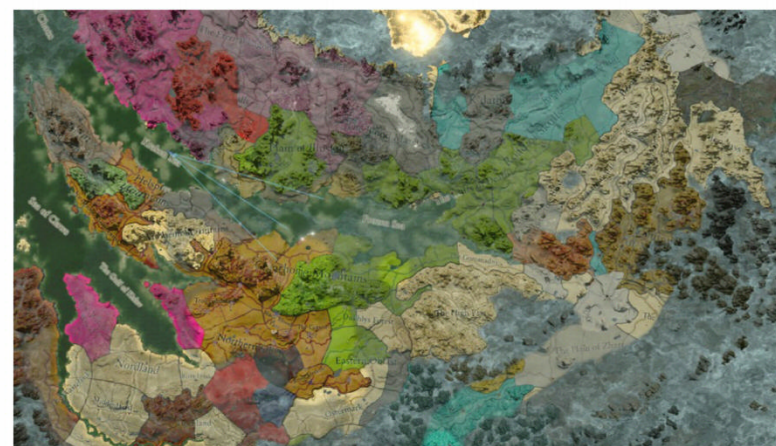


ABOVE: In the war business, this is what we call a clusterfuck.

FAR LEFT: Who needs puny rifles when you can carry a cannon?



Be'lakor looks comfy on this throne. Let's change that.



Above: I spy with my horrifying giant eye...



It's chilly in Kislev, but daemons can warm you up.

Total War: Warhammer III

» tell me I can shapeshift into a dragon, I'm going to shapeshift into a dragon and then stay that way.

It might not be as out-there as the Daemons of Chaos, but I'm pretty smitten with the Ogre Kingdoms. The big lads have been served up as pre-order DLC, but I expect we'll see them sold separately later. I recommend picking them up when that happens, because these hungry boys have a lot going on, including rapidly expanding camps that can be deployed in enemy territory, the strongest economy in the game, and a passion for meat that's both a curse and a superpower.

RAGS TO RICHES

That brings us to the economy. I know, not quite as exciting as daemons fighting elemental bears. And that's always been a problem for *Total War*: the economic side of things is typically an obligation rather than a system you actively want to engage with. *Warhammer III* doesn't have a perfect solution, but it does improve things at a faction level.

While it's easy to get rich as the Ogre Kingdoms, meat is even more important than gold. Without a constant supply of it, ogre armies turn to cannibalism. Now this technically happens in a less flavourful way with gold: when you run out, your troops start leaving. But with meat, this all happens locally. Each army has its own supply, and rather than getting meat from a large pool, it gets it from the local area, either from a camp or through battle.

This pushes you to be extremely aggressive, constantly getting into

fights and gobbling up new settlements to keep everyone's belly full, but also tasks you with essentially creating a supply line to keep the troops fed. It's not a complicated logistical challenge, but it is more engaging than earning gold.

Grand Cathay's Ivory Road trading system is very different but similarly benefits from being designed with

Cathay's narrative identity in mind. While most trading in *Total War* involves just chatting to other leaders and striking a deal, the Ivory Road lets Cathay dispatch caravans to distant lands, selecting the

value of the cargo and the route. During the journey your caravan might be attacked or face other crises, matching the potentially huge rewards with some equally big risks. For Cathay, then, trade is an interactive adventure.

Diplomacy, like the economy, has moved closer to the heart of what *Total War* does, but can still feel like an ancillary feature that doesn't get enough attention. *Three Kingdoms* made some big leaps here, and while *Warhammer III* doesn't include the personal diplomacy that *Three Kingdoms* introduced, it has borrowed the quick deal option, which makes figuring out what you can do and with whom much easier.

The headline feature, though, is brand-new: outposts. When you forge an alliance with another faction, you both get the option of constructing an outpost, which adds your troops to their garrison and, more importantly, lets you recruit troops from their roster. The most obvious benefit of this is being able to fill in gaps in your

roster, but its true value is the third set of recruitment slots, letting you recruit units even if you've maxed out your global and local allotment.

Diplomacy rewards you with incredible flexibility, which in turn encourages you to deal with your neighbours more often. Allied reinforcements cost Allegiance, which is earned by completing quests for the faction you're trying to sway, tasking you with defeating armies they have beef with, bringing the whole thing back to conflict.

After hundreds of hours of *Warhammer II*, the little quality of life improvements feel just as impactful, particularly the inclusion of simultaneous turns in multiplayer and simultaneous movement in both modes. You already know where your army is going, so why should you have to wait around and watch them do it before commanding the next one? You shouldn't, and now you don't need to bother.

I've already sunk nearly 100 hours into *Warhammer III*, which should give you an inkling of how much I'm digging it. And while I'm no longer as eager to go through the Realm of Chaos campaign again, that's only a slice of what *Warhammer III* is. There's a whole other domination campaign after you defeat Be'lakor, where you get to swallow up the rest of the world, helped by some special post-campaign rewards. And though I might bristle a bit at the idea of sending my leader off to his second job at inconvenient moments before that point, it's honestly just so much fun to play with these factions and create dream armies that I can put up with the hurdle.

While this would have been a fitting conclusion to what's been an ambitious trilogy, it's not done yet. There will be more factions, expansions and another campaign, combining the factions and maps across the whole trilogy, nicknamed 'Immortal Empires'. *Total War: Warhammer III* is already brilliant regardless of what comes next, but the prospect of six years worth of factions fighting over one map has me more excited than an ogre in an abattoir. The future looks bloody. ■



The headline feature, though, is brand-new: outposts

HOLIDAY IN HELL

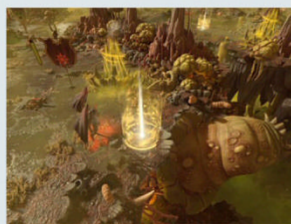
How to conquer the Realm of Chaos



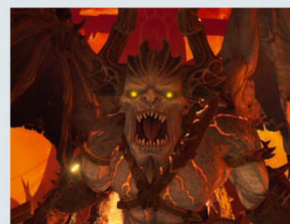
Starting on the 30th turn, rifts start appearing periodically, spitting out daemons and allowing you to travel to the Realm of Chaos.



Only leaders and their armies can enter, and each domain has specific challenges, for example Nurgle's domain will give you a nasty dose of poison.



In each map, you'll find points of interest that make the journey easier. You'll be able to get unique weapons, and get hints about where you should head next.



Once your objectives are fulfilled, you can head to the survival battle, unique to the Realm of Chaos, where you'll need to murder your way to the boss.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Total War: Warhammer III is a brilliant final act to the series and has the most inventive and unusual factions yet.

90

SCHOOL OF ROCK

Funk, folk, and math rock collide in rhythm game **A MUSICAL STORY**

By Tom Sykes

If *Guitar Hero* is about the fantasy of being a rock legend, *A Musical Story* is about the reality. This is a tough, unusual rhythm game that insists on perfection for each of its instrumental songs. That's perfection through repetition, through learning each rhythm and getting a feel for the music. Probably, it's more accurate to the process of learning to play a song. Real rock stars don't get a timeline showing them when, exactly, they need to hit each note.

So it goes in *A Musical Story*, a game where the timeline has (mostly) disappeared. Instead, you'll feel the tempo and rhythm of each tune (tapping your toes or nodding your head helps). It's an uncompromising rhythm game, and I like it for that. After passing each exam-like song section, you're rewarded with another story chunk, told via beautiful animation and (surely) the game soundtrack of the year.

While you'll flit between multiple instruments, the story follows the guitarist of a 1970s rock band, whose drug addiction becomes a problem on a long road trip. There's no dialogue, and it's not needed, thanks to the quality of the visual storytelling and the exceptional soundtrack, which you feel like you have some ownership of. Funk rock gives way to folk and big fat '70s synths, and extended math rock sections that will really test your ability to follow along.

So here's how it works. At regular junctures in each song, the scene will dwindle away as little icons appear in a circle around the screen. These represent notes, which you have to press in time to the music, using just two keys on your keyboard or controller. Whereas in *Guitar Hero* you can see the notes coming towards you, here there's no indicator showing your position in the song. Mess up just once, and you'll have to restart the whole thing.

There is some help offered, in the form of a subtle position marker that activates if you fail repeatedly, and which quietly disappears when you

improve. There's also an option to make this help permanent, at the expense of earning bonus stars – a gentle encouragement to play the game as intended.

Mess up just once, and you'll have to restart the whole thing

OUT OF TUNE

I still messed up a whole lot, despite the Assist mode's (somewhat flaky) help. *A Musical Story* is a game of constant, slightly unsatisfying learning. 'Perfection

through repetition' – some words I plopped down earlier. That's true here, as it is in *Guitar Hero*. However, in that game you're given entire songs

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A rhythm game following the guitarist of a 1970s rock band

EXPECT TO PAY
TBC

DEVELOPER
Glee-Cheese Studio

PUBLISHER
Digerati

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
glee-cheese.com

to memorise, to wrap your muscle memory around. By contrast, you only perform brief snippets in *A Musical Story*. You'll do a bass loop, then maybe drums and guitar, before finishing things off with a bit of synth. That's the ingredients for a song alright, but... I don't get to play the whole thing through?

To be fair, this is an approach that keeps the music fresh, and the challenge level high, as you'll never repeat anything you've already done. But it also means that that mastery is essentially thrown away. The game just shunts you on to something new.

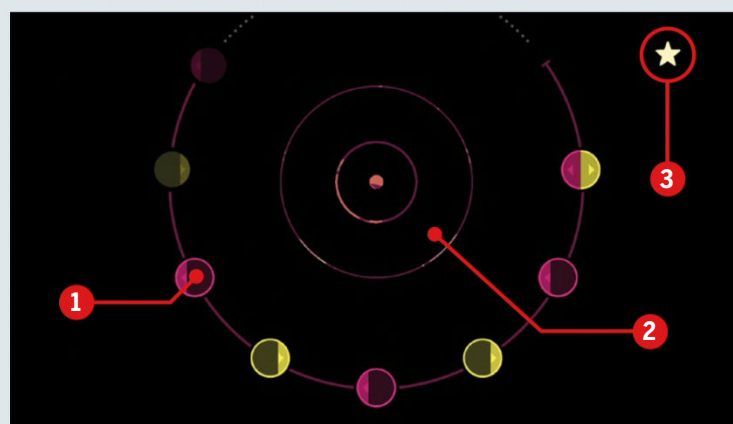
Of course, you can replay that chapter, or even the whole game. Returning to earlier chapters, I did find my playing had improved slightly, as if I had memorised the soundtrack by osmosis. But the playing still feels too bitty, and oddly separate from the story being told. Why does it matter that I perfect this song, when the band is currently falling apart? The protagonist is experiencing a drug-induced breakdown – and I'm in the corner doing my music homework.

A Musical Story is a game caught between two worlds. There are the cutscenes, and the playing bits, and they don't meaningfully connect – the story even fades out, so as not to be a distraction. Despite that, the actual rhythm mechanics are strong, paring the genre down to its essentials while still making it feel like you're playing a real instrument.

I felt connected to the music – and without having to plug a plastic guitar into my computer. I just wish the game knew what it wanted to be: a story you experience, or a set of challenges you master. As it is, it's awkwardly in the middle. ■

EXTENDED PLAY

Tracks of my tears



1 PIPPED
Your tapping is accompanied by a faint popping sound that sullies the soundtrack. When playing with headphones, however, I could barely hear it.

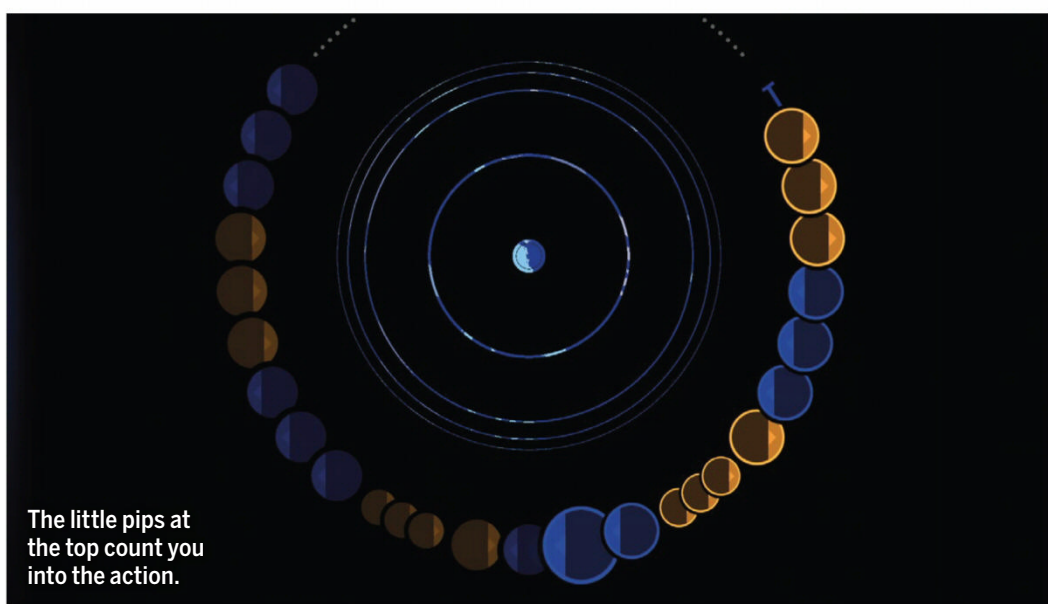
2 LP
Songs can last for a very long amount of time, if you keep screwing up, or over in a flash if you ace them first time. Unfortunately this can be unsatisfying.

3 STARMAN
Each song rewards you with a star if you don't make any mistakes. If you manage to collect all the stars, you'll unlock a bonus chapter and get to play more.

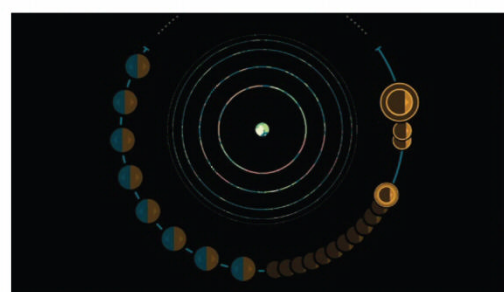
PC GAMER VERDICT

Great music, delivered in frustratingly bitty form. A clever rhythm game that doesn't mesh with its prominent story.

65



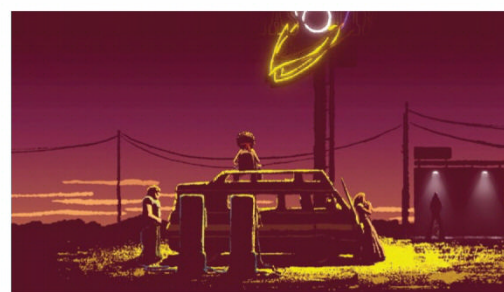
The little pips at the top count you into the action.



ABOVE: The band hits the road to reach the Pinewood festival.

LEFT: You have to hold some notes down until the icon starts flickering.

BELOW: It's fair to say the road trip doesn't go to plan.



GOO TIMES

RAINBOW SIX EXTRACTION is a thrilling but messy take on zombie co-op

By Morgan Park

Rainbow Six Extraction was announced in a world we no longer live in: the world of 2019. Back then, the co-op Siege spinoff was called *Rainbow Six Quarantine* (ha!). It was an unlucky time to be making a game about a virus, but a great time to bring back the co-op zombie shooter. Siege's *Outbreak* event was an excellent taste of what *Left 4 Siege* could be, and I hoped *Extraction* would blow that mode out into a collection of campaigns.

Three years later, and not only is *Extraction* one of many co-op shooters on the block, but it's hardly recognisable from the original *Outbreak* campaign. It's the anti-*Left 4 Dead* – a precise, gruelling survival game about keeping your head down and never poking the bear. If you do, *Extraction*'s sadistic AI takes over, eager to punish the smallest lapse in judgment.

It's a mean game that can produce some great thrills, but its strict rules make some awkward design choices stick out. *Extraction* is also a smaller game than I anticipated – Ubisoft's decision to lower its price to £40 and introduce it to PC Game Pass at launch really makes sense now. I really liked mastering each of the dozen objective types and maps, but missions start to get samey pretty quickly.

SCREECH AND CLEAR

Extraction missions are, at their core, maps with three objectives randomly pulled from a pool of 12. Objectives have to be tackled in order, with each one occupying its own chunk of the map.

Your squad of three (or just you, if you're flying solo) are dropped into these locales with no other context than the current task at hand. There's no campaign with

connecting goals like 'find the safe room' or 'cross this rickety bridge'. You simply do the job and get out with as much XP as possible. During the first ten hours, when I was learning how each objective worked and trying out operators, the sparse format worked. Every mission was throwing one or two obstacles my way I hadn't seen before, be it a new alien enemy (called Archaeans) that

Operators can go down in just a few hits from Archaeans

can plant sneaky flash bombs or a modifier that makes the black Sprawl goo slowly coating every surface hazardous to step on.

I also died a lot early on, way more than I usually do when I pick up a new FPS. It took a while to realise you can't play *Extraction* like other co-op shooters. Where *Back 4 Blood* is about managing hordes while running to the next goal, sprinting around a building full of Archaeans is asking for death.

My squad was always better off when we crouched or walked everywhere, carefully choosing which enemies to engage or avoid. The format is seemingly inspired by the stealthy gameplay of *GTFO*, a survival horror co-op shooter that recently escaped Early Access. operators can go down in just a few hits from Archaeans, and even if they survive an encounter, they can never get lost health back permanently.

CRIT CHANCE

Thankfully, thousands of hours of *Rainbow Six Siege*-reflexes come in handy. *Extraction*'s shooting and movement are identical. It feels pretty cool to methodically clear rooms and one-shot kill basic grunts in the head. Every gun that isn't a shotgun comes with a suppressor that you should never take off.

I've had countless close calls where I walk past a doorway, get spotted by an Archaean and snap to a headshot before it can make a peep. I was also surprised at how much I enjoyed dealing with the Sprawl – black ooze that rapidly spreads as nests are disturbed. The sound of it crawling its way across every surface is gross and I never got tired of shooting it to 'draw' a navigable path through a room.

Once my squadmates and I got into a groove headshotting everything in our way, stealth-killing nests to halt enemy spawns, and shooting the nasty black stuff, the lower two difficulties (of four total)

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A co-op *Siege* spin-off with alien zombies

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

PUBLISHER
In-house

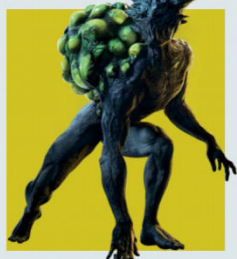
REVIEWED ON
RTX 3060, Ryzen 7 5700G 3.8Ghz, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Co-op

LINK
bit.ly/3BmkY3r

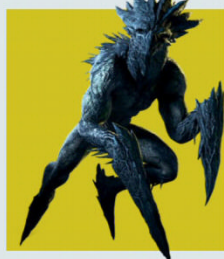
MEET THE BADDIES

Avoid these Archaeans at all cost



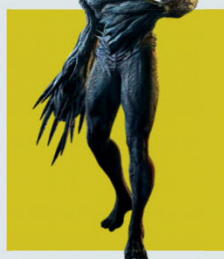
BLOATER

Of all the eight Archaeans, none gave me more trouble than these. Shoot the glowy bits to detonate them.



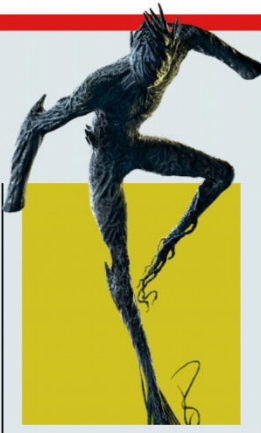
ROOTER

This sneaky gremlin crawls on four legs and sends a binding wave at players in a straight line. It's easy to kill though.



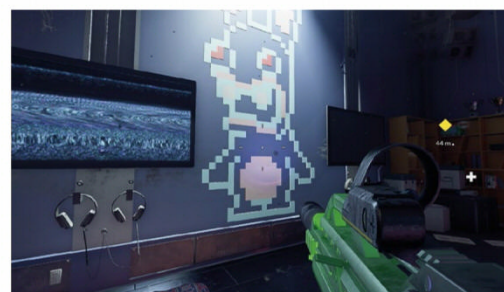
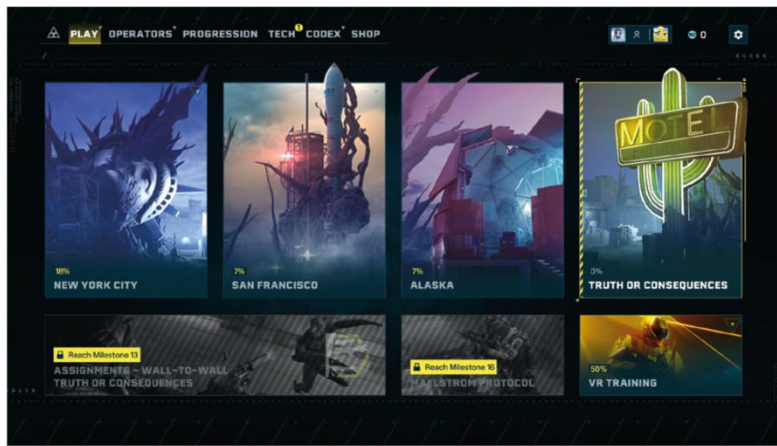
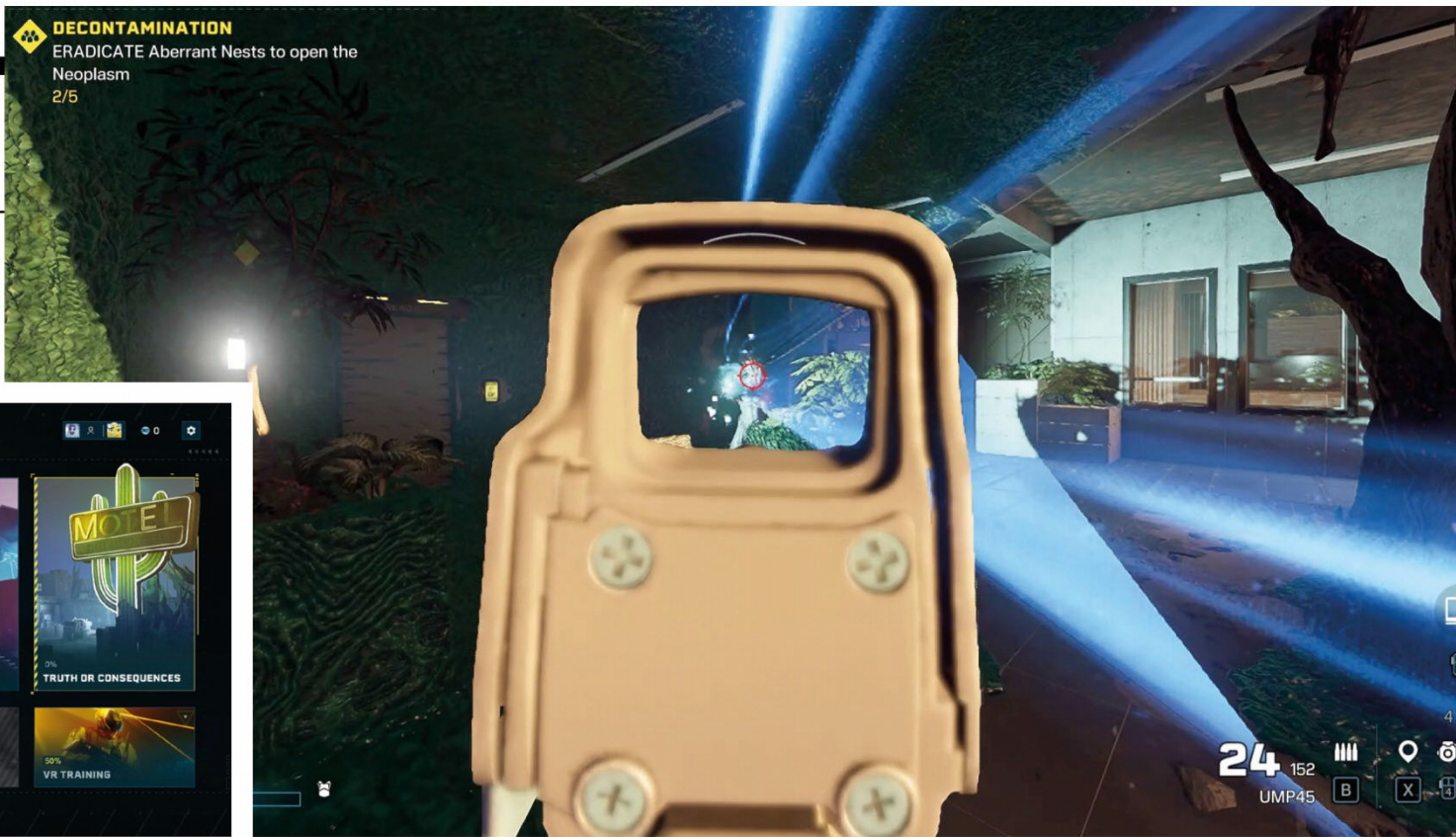
SPIKER

Spikers aren't a major threat in a straight up fight, but their weird gun arms make them very dangerous indeed.



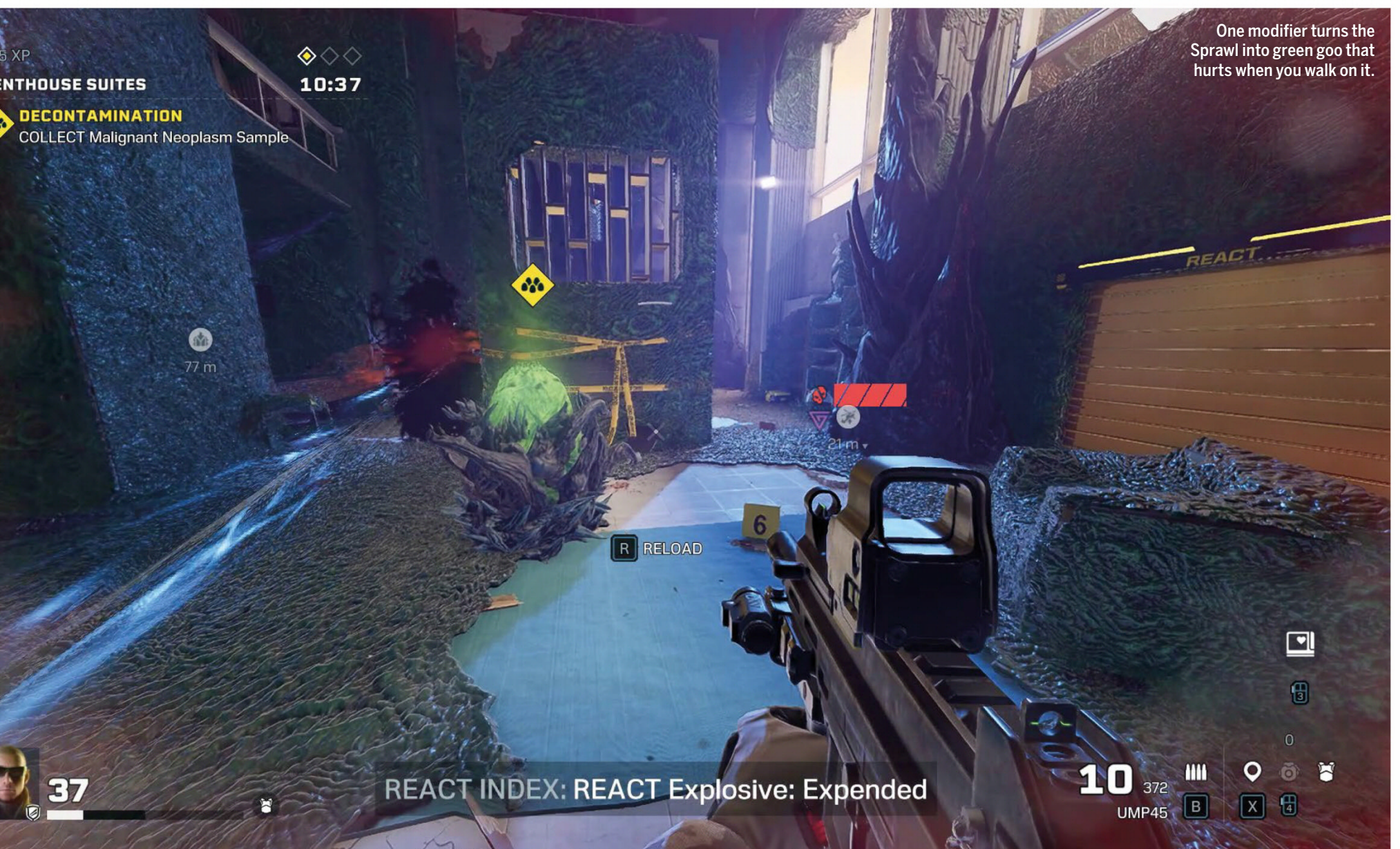
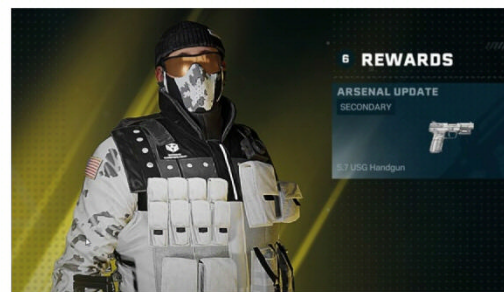
TORMENTOR

These guys burrow underground and pop up just long enough to throw slow-moving bombs at your face.



FAR LEFT: Sometimes REACT scientists have to be rescued from a mission and carried to safety.

LEFT: Hey, I know that double-toothed bunny.



One modifier turns the Sprawl into green goo that hurts when you walk on it.

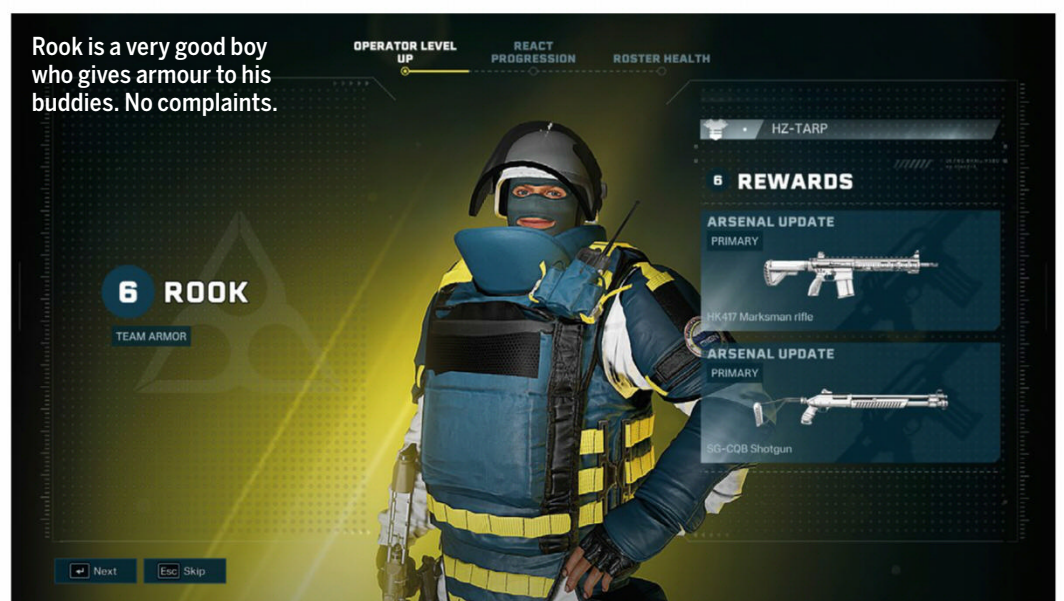
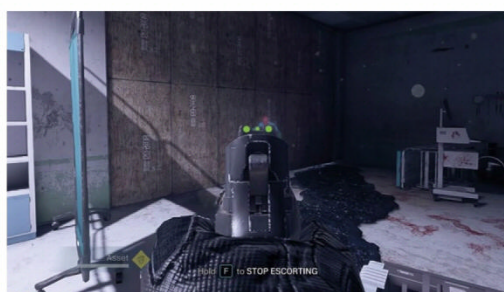


Suspended up top is the alien craft the Archaeans came to Earth on.



RIGHT: You do a lot of stabbing gooey sacs with knives in this game.

BELOW: *Extraction* is the only zombie co-op game that can actually give me the spooks.



» that mostly spawn grunt enemies became way too easy.

Things get a lot less balanced when you crank it up to Severe or Critical difficulty. With the heat turned up, basic navigation becomes a chore. Bigger enemies won't go down in a single shot to their weak point, and even if you kill them fast, they'll still probably alert everything within earshot and

kickstart every nest to spawn more. There's seemingly no limit to how many Archaeans can spawn from a nest, so if we couldn't destroy every nest before that happened, they'd pump out more aliens than we could shoot.

This can get frustrating not only because dormant and active nests look and sound the same, but because it basically doesn't matter how well we perform after a billion enemies show up. Best case, we extract from the mission early and take a loss, which usually means a small enough XP reward that it wasn't worth our time in the first place.

Back 4 Blood also had early trouble with difficulty tuning. Similarly, I think *Extraction* could use some adjustments to enemy spawn rates. What I've encountered feels less like an AI director dynamically deciding what we can or can't handle and more like an open faucet randomly spewing out powerful enemies unless we shut it off.

SPRAWL ABOARD

For how much of *Extraction* can be confusing, it's nice to tab over to the operators and see a bunch of familiar faces from *Siege*. Ubi has plucked 18 operators from its existing roster and lightly modified their kits to suit alien zombie murder.

Most operators slot in pretty well to PvE action – Doc and Finka's healing tech and Rook's armour plates needed virtually no changes. Others have been lightly tweaked, like Pulse and IQ's sensors, which now detect nests and spare ammo from a distance instead of heartbeats and enemy gadgets. It's cool to see operators that I've never really jived with in *Siege* become favourites in *Extraction*. Alibi's holographic decoys are obviously pretty bleh in a PvP setting with canny human enemies, but they're amazingly useful for luring Archaeans away from me.

It's a shame that most of the operator gadgets (and side gadgets) are only situationally useful. Hibana, one of *Siege*'s most popular operators thanks to her hard breaching pellet launcher, is basically just a slower way to throw an impact grenade in *Extraction*. Jäger's ADS turrets are nice to take down a few enemies before they blow up, but they're too

slow and clunky to deploy in a fight. IQ can find ammunition across the map, but it's not difficult to find stuff without her. Because of *Extraction*'s high lethality, it was hard for my squad to justify bringing

operators who don't contribute to armour or health in some way.

Secondary gadgets have the same problem. Ubi cooked up a bunch of new throwables for the Archaeans, like a scan grenade, a 'glue' trap that slows enemies like the one in *Prey*, and a literal forcefield that blocks ranged attacks, but those were all made instantly obsolete in my mind when I realised a single impact grenade can stun an enemy, clear Sprawl from the area, destroy nests, or destroy a wall between you and your goal. There's also a third slot where you can equip extra ammo or a drone, but those seemed like needless luxuries when I could take a self-revive kit or some extra body armour instead.

Ubisoft has plucked 18 operators from its existing roster

GROSS PRODUCT

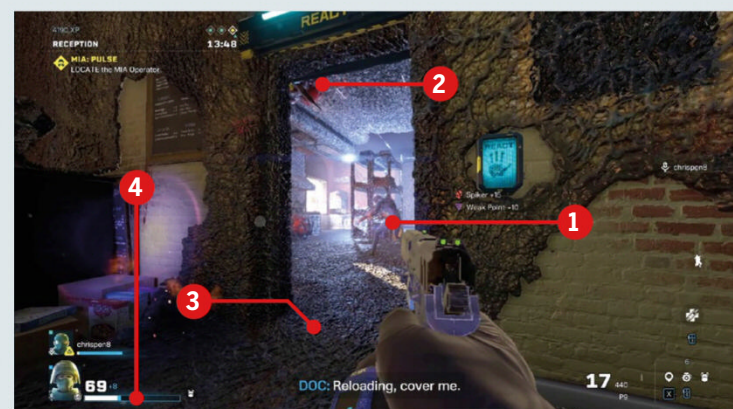
How to read the room

1 SPIKER

Most Archaeans can be very quickly stealth killed if you don't make a peep.

2 NESTS

Gross pus sacs that should be shot on sight before they birth more aliens.



3 THE SPRAWL

Black goo that slows players down, you can shoot or melee attack it to get rid of it.

4 HEALTH BAR

69 HP left – nice. You'll need to keep an eye on this, as healing isn't plentiful.

OUT OF EXTRACTION

As I slowly discovered with *Extraction*'s mission variety, there's little to work towards once you unlock operators. For hours I kept pecking away at locations I've been to, completing the same random objectives in the same places, wondering what I still stood to gain. The answer is a bunch of cosmetics I don't care about and an endgame mode called Maelstrom Protocol that triples the normal number of objectives to nine. After realising that mode doesn't sound remotely interesting, I had run out of reasons to play *Rainbow Six Extraction*.

That's OK – I had around 20 hours of good times in a beautifully creepy FPS with great shooting. That and its inclusion on PC Game Pass at launch is reason enough to give it a shot with some friends.

But I can't shake the thought of what *Extraction* would be like with a *L4D*-inspired campaign structure. There's so much to enjoy in its slow, deliberate co-op combat, but its disjointed missions cause the whole game to feel aimless. By trying to add replayability through randomisation, Ubi has made a less replayable game.

Rainbow Six Extraction is not at all the spiritual *Left 4 Dead 3* I was hoping for back then, which is fine, because that game, *Back 4 Blood*, came out just a few months ago. But unlike in 2019, *Extraction* is not alone. The last few years have seen an explosion of cool co-op games vying to be the star of my Discord server – *Back 4 Blood* is fantastic, *The Anacrusis* is intriguing, *Ready Or Not* is pretty cool, *GTFO* is fun, *Deep Rock Galactic* and *World War Z* are still getting updates, and *Warhammer 40K: Darktide* is on the horizon.

There are a lot of fun ways to shoot AI baddies with buds in 2022, so it's impressive that *Extraction* is distinct from every game I just listed. It's trying to be something slower and tactical, and it even succeeds most of the time. But punishing is not usually what my friends and I are looking for in a co-op shooter (we get enough of that from competitive games), so I doubt *Extraction* will ever be the game we fire up on a Friday night. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Rainbow Six Extraction is a fun but unremarkable co-op shooter with some very good ooze. It's a good distraction.

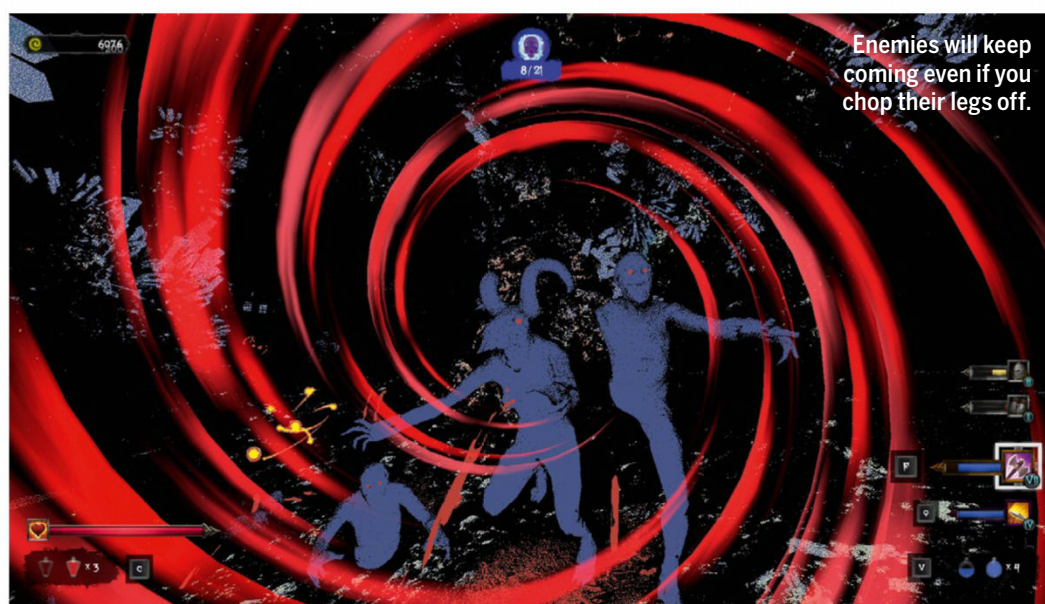
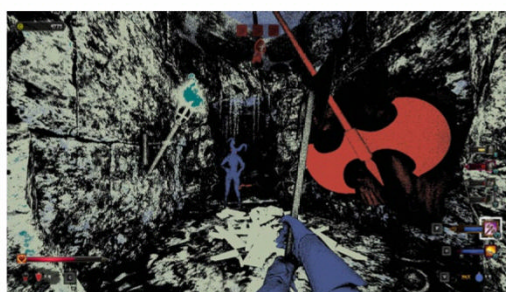
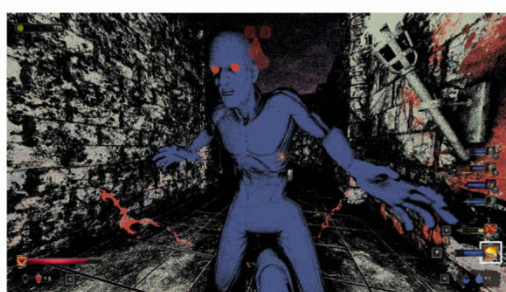
73



ABOVE: Sometimes it gets a bit Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

RIGHT: He might be a zombie, but he's still susceptible to a boot to the crotch.

BELOW RIGHT: The brutal traps work on enemies as well as you.



Enemies will keep coming even if you chop their legs off.



Bosses follow the same rules: chop, chop those limbs.

IT'S A SIN

Going out on a limb with grungy roguelite **MORTAL SIN**

By Tom Sykes

Mortal Sin builds a riveting combat system from only a handful of elements. The most vital of these is your melee weapon. There's a compelling rhythm to combat, which interrupts tense, cramped, first-person dungeon-crawling with sudden bursts of frantic mouse-clicking (or button-hammering). Similar to *Dead Space*, you need to dismember enemies to kill them. There are a lot of heads and limbs being flung around.

Fighting is the core of *Mortal Sin*: an action roguelite draped in a stark, grungy visual style. This is not a game that wastes time on things like story or fancy menu design. You begin each run dumped in a chapel ruin, before you tackle one of the randomised gauntlets.

When you enter one of the gauntlets, an oppressive atmosphere settles immediately as thudding footsteps echo threateningly throughout the level. Pretty soon you make first contact with an enemy, hacking wildly at its limbs before kicking the headless creature into a deadly trap. Which brings me to the next vital combat element: the world.

There's a level of interactivity here that reminds me of *Dark Messiah of Might & Magic*, which is still the daddy when it comes to first-person booting. There are no orcs to punt off cliffs, but there is a smorgasboard of

vicious traps, which are non-discriminating in who they chop up. While they might seem terrifying, they're actually one of the best tools in your arsenal, and easily avoided by the dash-happy player.

You have to watch your durability just as much as your health

So you have your weapons, some nifty moves, and dungeons full of helpful traps – let's add some loot and skills and turn it into a proper roguelite. Loot is strewn about, and by grabbing it you ditch

your old gear – there's no inventory management to bog things down.

As in any roguelite worth its salt, you're trying to build killer synergies, for example by pairing the regen ability with a skill that lessens its durability loss. Regen heals damage, while the skill means the item won't wear out so quickly. Add an ability that makes durability potions come more frequently, and *surely* you'll be set for the rest of the run.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A melee-focused action roguelite with a grungy visual style

EXPECT TO PAY
TBC

DEVELOPER
Nikola Todorovic

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
mortalsingame.com

Well, no. Here, synergies are a careful balance that can be shattered at the drop of a pauldron. Durability is the pressing factor, with your gear degrading each time it's used. Those durability potions will top you up, but even with the finest skills they won't last forever. When an item's durability is expended, it's lost.

MORTAL COMBAT

You can't let your guard down, you have to watch your durability just as much as your health, which is probably why it's displayed so prominently onscreen. It's a clever approach to synergies, which does much prevent the steamroller effect that can happen when you grow too powerful in these games.

However, in other ways this is an under-baked roguelite. I'm torn on whether I prefer persistence, or the pure blank slate in roguelites – but *Mortal Sin* has found an unsatisfying middle ground. After each run, acquired gold can be spent at the crafting station or potion shop, to give you a leg-up, but only if you don't exit the game. Quit out, and you'll begin with an empty purse.

The only persistence you can rely on is your skill at *Mortal Sin*, which will improve as you settle into its rhythm. More so than a lot of action games, this put me into a focused state, as I hacked and dashed through the hazards on each level.

Mortal Sin has such exciting combat that it's easy to overlook its less refined elements, like the iffy persistence or frequent yo-yoing between the different dungeons. Where it matters – in its loot, its interaction, and above all its heart-stopping melee – *Mortal Sin* is one thrilling roguelite. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Mortal Sin is a skeletal roguelite, but the surprisingly meaty combat goes a long way to making up for that.

81

MORTAL REMAINS

What's happening while you're hacking?



1 DRINK UP
Potions regenerate as you harvest red and blue blobs inside dungeons.

2 CHOP TO IT
Sever limbs to kill enemies. It's pretty funny when they're hopping about on one leg.

3 BAR HUMBUG
These bars show the durability of your weapons and armour.

VISIONARY

NOT FOR BROADCAST is the silliest thing on TV

By Ian Evenden

Making up your own curse words is funny, and the developer of *Not for Broadcast* seems to agree. Having started off with a few conventional swears, it's not long before all sorts of wibbleclip is added to the list of naughty words. This matters, because it's your job as the vision mixer of a nightly TV news show to censor them, so as not to offend the sensitive ears of your audience. Which includes the government.

As Alex Winston, non-gender-specific spouse to Sam and with two kids, you're a cleaner at the TV studio when you make the mistake of answering a ringing phone. It's election night, the Advance party has stormed to victory on a platform slightly to the left of Michael Foot, and for some reason the regular vision mixer has decided to leave the country.

Somehow you become a regular at the job. You're in charge of the camera feeds from the studio and any outside broadcast, choosing which one is broadcast. Then there's things like cueing up adverts, countering interference, and bleeping out swearing. You can do any of these with the mouse or keyboard, so you may be using the mouse to stay ahead of the interference while cutting between angles on an interview with number keys, and hitting space to bleep out bad language. All while chuckling at the script.

CANIS CANEM EDITOR

Then it gets complicated. You are the sole person in charge of what the country sees on the news, so when the Advance party starts some dubious behaviour, you can toe the party line or attempt to subvert it. Your choice of adverts or images can improve the fortunes of companies in which you own shares, but get this or your political manipulations wrong,

There was the opportunity for some real political satire here

and things can turn sour quickly. The news programme rapidly becomes government propaganda, forcing you to make decisions that can affect your home life. The text-based interludes between the TV chaos are where the politics tries to make itself felt, as you face decisions about whether to help family members escape, or how to stretch the food a little further at Christmas. The contrast between your home and professional lives is stark. Take, for example, an early interview with a police chief, who

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT? A TV propaganda simulator
- EXPECT TO PAY £19.50
- DEVELOPER NotGames
- PUBLISHER tinyBuild
- REVIEWED ON Threadripper 2950X, 64GB RAM, RTX 3080 10GB
- MULTIPLAYER No
- LINK notforbroadcastgame.com

has some strong and offensive views, during which a gimp literally falls out of the cupboard behind him. It's not what you'd call subtle, and may leave some feeling cold rather than warmed by chuckles.

There was the opportunity for some real political satire here, but any blows fail to land, as the humour is just too silly. Parts are genuinely funny, but other times you expect Noel Edmonds or Jeremy Beadle to make an appearance (and if you're blissfully unaware of '80s British TV, there really is no context that will help with those references beyond Google, where you should beware of Noseybonk). A darker edge might have helped, some sort of commentary on current events in Downing Street and beyond.

The fact that a group of people got together, decided to release what is essentially an FMV game in 2022 (hey, it worked for *Telling Lies*) and then filmed a bunch of silly, revolting, slapstick news segments and adverts, is just wonderful. These people are genuinely enjoying themselves, and it's a joy to see. You can watch the films back on a virtual video player at any time, to catch the bits you missed.

However, don't go into it expecting *The Day Today* or *Brass Eye*, as any commentary on politics, apart maybe from 'oppressive government bad,' is so slight as to be non-existent. The actual interactivity is also limited, despite attempts to introduce new mechanics like dealing with thunderstorms, though keeping everything running smoothly and audience-pleasing while a naked swearing policeman tugs at your attention from the top left is really enough to put anyone off a career in live television. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Not For Broadcast is deeply silly and all the better for it – the missed political targets hardly matter in the end.

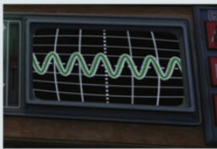
85

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

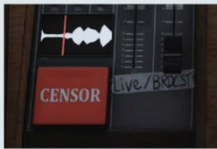
Get to know your vision-mixing console



FEEDS
These are the camera feeds for you to choose between. Don't linger too long, viewers hate that.



INTERFERENCE
Keep the green waveform in the white guidelines, or your audience will switch off.



CENSOR
Any swears appear as red in the audio box, but you're better off doing it by ear.



ADVERTS
Three slots and six to choose from? Of course you'll play the ones that benefit you. And the party.

It's all completely innocent, officer, you see...



A Teletext-style ranking system lets you know how well you've done.



FAR LEFT: Flard. We're not sure what it is, but people seem to like it.

LEFT: Jeremy is the lead newsreader. Get used to that stupid, sweaty face.

BELOW LEFT: Don't forget to switch everything on, or the news won't work.



They're naked and angry. You've got to laugh. The newsreader certainly is.

FLOWER POWER

Become a botanical detective in the engrossing **STRANGE HORTICULTURE**

By Christopher Livingston

This is the best detective game I've played in years, and it's mostly about staring at plants. As the new owner of a small shop in a quaint little town, I've only got three things at my disposal: a small collection of unusual and unidentified plants, an ageing botany book with a handful of entries, and my wits. With them I manage to solve dozens of wonderful little mysteries, untangle a few major ones, and even save the world.

Then I played through it again and didn't save the world, but I did unleash an unspeakable horror upon it. Also, this one time? I straight-up poisoned a guy with some plants because he was a little bit rude to me.

Strange Horticulture takes place almost entirely behind the counter of the plant shop, as each day customers visit one by one. Sometimes they know the name of the plant they're looking for, but usually they only have a few small details: they know it has red flowers, or that it cures a stomach ailment, or that it's a nice decorative plant for a wedding. Using the few details each customer gives me, I look through the plants on my shelf, dragging them onto my desk for a closer examination. Then I flip through the pages in my botany book, which contains plant names, drawings and descriptions, to try to figure out which plant to give my current customer. Every person who enters my shop presents me with a tiny little mystery, and thanks to the beautiful and gently animated plants and elaborate descriptions in my botany book, they're always a pleasure to solve.

It's wonderfully tricky, too, especially as my inventory slowly grows from just a few plants to a massive collection of nearly 80. My botany book fills with new entries, giving me a lengthy tome to page through while I play plant detective. Patience and close scrutiny are required: just because a plant has heart-shaped leaves doesn't mean that it's the only plant with heart-

shaped leaves, and sometimes even details about the scent of the plant, the number of petals on a flower, or how its leaves feel under my fingers come into play.

Along with helping customers in the shop, there's a large map to unfold on your desk, which you can click on to visit its locations. Exploring the map is usually the result of receiving a letter from the mailman or getting

cryptic messages each evening after you close your shop. The map is the other half of *Strange Horticulture*'s detective experience, where you

There's all sorts of satisfying fiddly business to do as you play

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A deeply compelling puzzle game about identifying plants and solving mysteries

EXPECT TO PAY
£13

DEVELOPER
Bad Viking

PUBLISHER
Iceberg Interactive

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
iceberg-games.com/strange-horticulture

decode clues to discover the location of new plants or events.

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS

Beyond the customers looking for herbs to cure their ailments, there are recurring characters who repeatedly visit the shop with a grander purpose. There's a mysterious dark entity out there, slowly growing in power and threatening the land. Some of the characters you meet want to banish it back into the darkness, while others want to control it, or kill it, or worship it. There's a branching storyline and multiple endings, depending on the choices you make.

And there's all sorts of satisfying fiddly business to do as you play. Your book, map, letters, clue-filled notes, magnifying lens and other items can be dragged around, set down on your desk, or stored in your desk drawer which can open and close. At the end of each day I found myself arranging all the new plants I'd gained that day, tidying up my desk, putting everything in its correct compartment in the drawer, and closing it as if I were really running a plant shop and wanted to keep things neat and organised. Did I mention that you have a cat? You can pet it and it'll purr happily.

And while I love the main storyline of witchcraft and demons and obsessed cultists, I'm mostly just happy to study all those beautiful flowers and herbs and mushrooms, flip through my growing book of plants, and affix bright little labels to everything I've correctly identified. Maybe people think I'm just a small plant shop owner solving puzzles. But I know the truth. I'm the world's greatest plant detective. And you really shouldn't be rude to me. ■

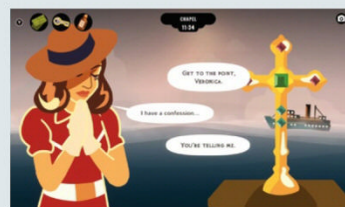
SUPER SLEUTH

Dive into more mysteries on PC



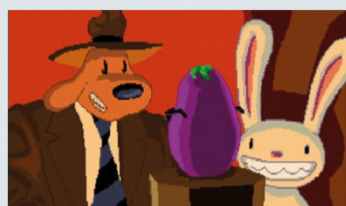
HER STORY

Solve a murder case by unearthing video clips from a fractured database.



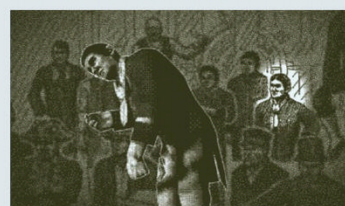
OVERBOARD!

A detective game in reverse... because this time you're the killer on the loose.



SAM & MAX HIT THE ROAD

The freelance police track down a missing Yeti by solving absurd puzzles in roadside America.



RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

Fifty-one people perished on this ship, and you'll find out how by visiting the scene of each death.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A beautiful and fascinating detective game packed with mysteries, puzzles, and intrigue.

90

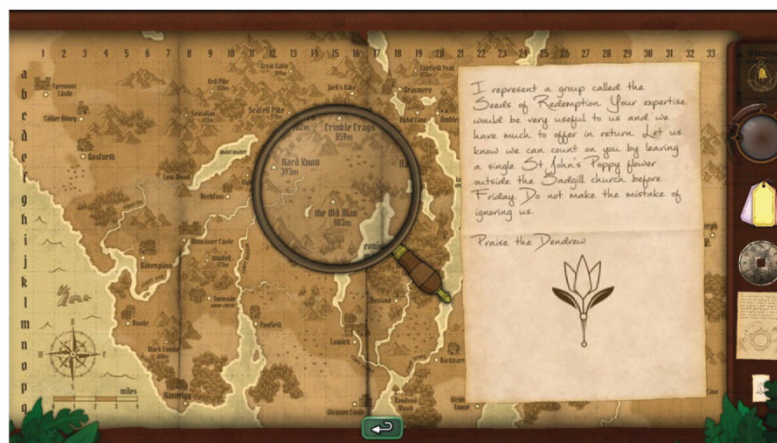
There's a small cast of mysterious characters to get to know.



Faye Swift

Faye grew up with her mother. Her father was rarely violent, but once is enough. When he struck her it finally broke the hold he had over her mother and she fled in the night, the sleeping Faye held close.

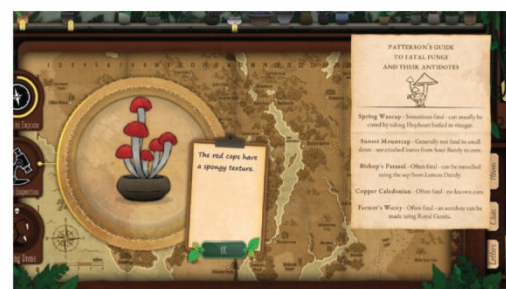
Faye often has vivid dreams but has never considered that other people do not. She came to Strange Horticulture seeking relief from her nightmares.



FAR LEFT: Along with flowers and herbs, there are lots of cool 'shrooms.

LEFT: New pages are regularly added to your encyclopaedia.

BELOW: Examine leaves, flowers, stems, bulbs, fruits and more.



The VGA-style artwork is wonderfully nostalgic.



WELL, WELL, WELL

We're sending our love down the well in **LILY'S WELL**

You can see why wells are scary: they're big, dark holes in the ground, perfect for ghosts to crawl out of, or people to fall into in horror stories, or any old TV show starring an animal. So it goes in *Lily's Well*, which is one of those cryptic horror games that only reveals its secrets after much repetition, and where nothing (obviously) is what it seems.

You play as Lily, a nine year old raised in the woods by her father, who disappears just as she hears a voice calling desperately for help. The voice is emanating from the well, and Lily's determined to get to the bottom of it. Unfortunately, there's no ladder, and no handy massive coil of rope, so she'll have to cobble one together out of common items such as bedsheets, clothes, and lengths of vine.

Luckily, there are plenty of rope-like items. That old, frayed cable, perhaps. Or you could use a roll of toilet paper. And if you're thinking, 'That would never work,' you have a point. The components you choose to use absolutely matter, when the time comes to interact with the well. If you've collected a dodgy rope section – even one weak link in

the whole – the rope will snap and Lily will plummet to her death.

That's your first challenge, then: figuring out which of the many items would make good lengths of rope, as you can't discard any of the objects that you pick up.

In practice this feels more like an early '90s adventure game

ROPED IN

A few things change as you replay the game – mainly creepy little visual flourishes – but while it resembles a modern, fourth-wall-breaking horror story, in practice this feels

more like an early '90s adventure game. It isn't just the VGA pixel art, which will ensnare fans of Sierra games. No, it's the sense of humour, the frequent gory deaths, and the inevitable restarts as you try to bypass every obstacle, every punchline, thrown at you.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A horror adventure game with multiple endings and one mysterious well

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
PureIceBlue

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/LilysWell

There's no manual saving, which is a bit shit, as always. Every death returns you to the start of the game, albeit with knowledge that will let you speedrun the opening puzzles. There are around a dozen endings to collect here, most consisting of violent ends for Lily. Finding them all will take persistence, trial and error, and lots of running around repeating things you've already done. How deep you explore the well will depend on your tolerance for such repetition, and upon how you've been hooked by the intriguing mystery.

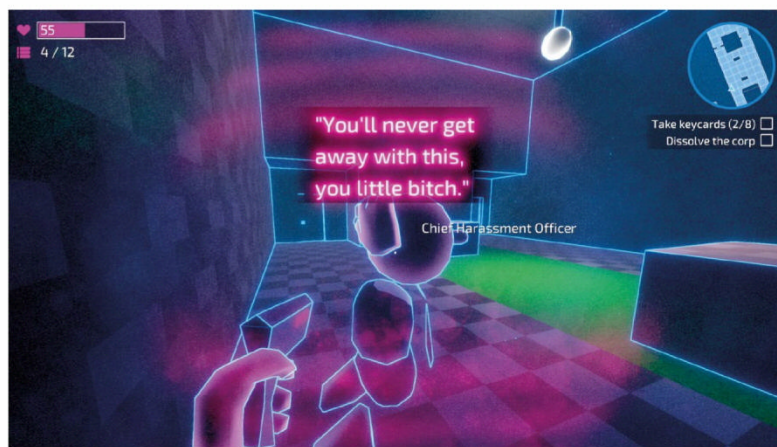
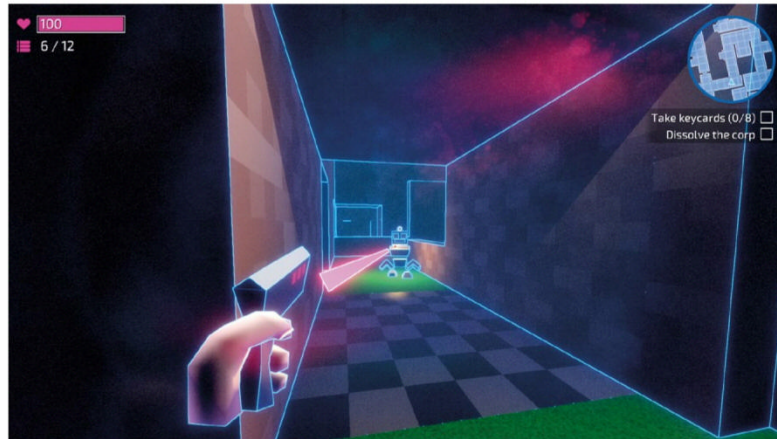
There are scarier, more inventive horror games out there, though most require a greater investment of your time, not to mention your money. *Lily's Well* offers the essence of a positive indie horror darling, while leaning more into the adventure side of things. If you're intrigued enough to get to the bottom of it, you've nothing to lose by diving in. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

While it becomes a little fiddly and repetitive, *Lily's Well* is an intriguing mystery with a nostalgic visual style.

75

BELOW: Robotic guards patrol the premises.



HOSTILE TAKEOVER

TCB in **NEON STRUCT: DESPERATION COLUMN**

The original *Neon Struct* was a cyberpunk *Thief*, filled with structures to explore, mainly by crouch-running from shadow to shadow. Now, Minor Key Games has returned to its neon world for a smaller roguelite made for the 7-Day FPS competition.

The mission here calls for shooting, and intimidation, rather than very careful sneaking around, as you infiltrate a megacorp to take it down. Over several randomly assembled floors, you have to gather eight keycards, and also make it to the top floor, while contending with a bunch of pesky, patrolling robots.

Ammunition is strictly limited, but you can find enough to make do by raiding filing cabinets and plundering the robot corpses. Keycards, meanwhile, can be found on the human staff, who need to be chased

down and intimidated with the action button. They're given titles like Chief Cowardice Officer and Chief Harassment Officer. *Desperation Column* is a cyberpunk game that embraces the 'punk' bit more authentically than most other videogames in the genre.

It's a cathartic game, if not a satisfying roguelite – it's just too basic to be worth much replaying. The layouts might change, but they're still samey corridors housing a couple of different robot types, and with little to do other than shoot and scavenge ammo. You can't even restore your health, which I guess adds tension in a crude way, but that also causes runs to become basically unrecoverable.

But that's the nature of jam games: they're prototypes, usually with a couple of cool ideas. This is certainly worth a look on that basis. ■

63

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
David Lindsey Pittman

LINK
bit.ly/3Arhxbf

TOIL AND TROUBLE

Run a hectic potion shop in **CRAZY CAULDRON**

Be a witch, they said. It'll be fun, they said. Then how come I'm spending every moment frantically brewing potions for demanding customers? *Crazy Cauldron* gives you the keys to the hottest potion shop in the realm, but keeping up with demand is an increasingly stressful process.

As they appear at your window, with little speech bubbles telling you what they want, you have to gather ingredients, then plonk the right ones in your bubbling cauldron. You're trying to match your potion's hue with that in the bubble above each customer's head. If successful, they'll disappear in a flurry of points.

It's not explained what these brews actually *do*; you're only playing with colours here, for instance by mixing a red bug and a yellow plant to make an orange potion.

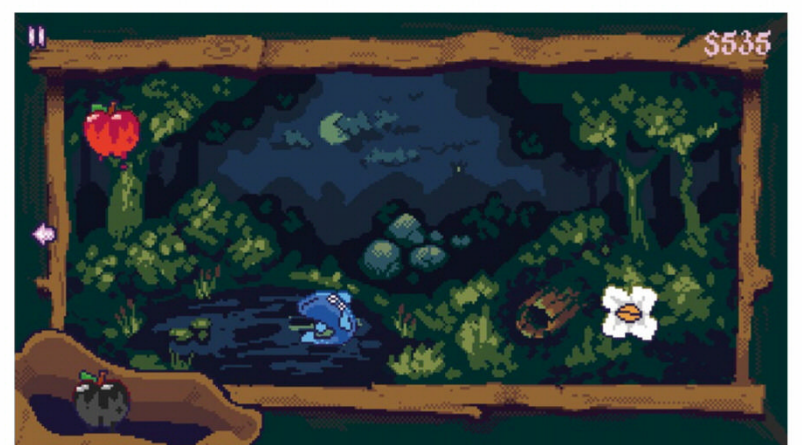
Sound easy enough? Well, sure, for your *basic* colours, or to make a lighter shade of black, by adding something white. But suddenly three customers appear at once, requesting colours that seem quite indistinct. Is that a very, very light blue, or a very, very light purple? I'll just consult my colour chart – oh crap, game over.

Did I mention you're against the clock? Oh right: you're against the clock, with each mistake adding a hefty penalty to a meter o'doom. The only way to reverse the tide is to complete customers' orders, which (blessedly) restores a chunk of time.

Crazy Cauldron is a charming score-chaser, whose only real drawback is its vague palette, and it would be possible to memorise that over time. Can you beat my high score? Yes, but then I don't think the witchy life is for me. ■

76

BELOW: Match your potions to the colours in the speech bubbles.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Quite Good

LINK
bit.ly/3u6ww9z



WEIRD ALBION

Apple pie and awkward flirting in **FABLE ANNIVERSARY**

It's been said countless times before, but there's something weird about playing HD remasters of old games and some incorrect part of your brain deciding they look and feel the same as the originals. It's especially deranged in the case of *Fable Anniversary*, with its god rays, wafting leaves, and upgraded faces, which now no longer resemble manhandled plasticine. But there's a very good reason why returning to Albion feels so cosily familiar.

It's a lot to do with sound. It helps that everything is cued up by Danny Elfman's sweeping opening theme. Hearing it stirs up all sorts of buried memories, like smelling the same flavour of Lynx you wore on your first date with the person who shattered your heart. These small moments help it feel special. The voice acting is amusing and unique – the kind of crisply-delivered West Country chatter you expect of something written by Stephen Merchant.

Other things age less well. It still feels like a system designed for the Xbox 360. Emotes are especially clumsy. Finding the desired response to a situation feels about as natural and enjoyable as fondue with sociopath in-laws. By the time you find the

response you want, the moment has passed and you've accidentally farted twice. You could, of course, make use of the PC shortcuts, but it somehow feels like it's against the spirit of things – if you *really* want to flirt with that sexy

chicken you must earn the right by blundering through *Fable's* wretched menu system.

Combat holds up somewhat better, even if the controls feel like they're from the strange, bygone age before standardisation.

It's satisfying enough that *Fable's* core loop of 'pick a quest, smash up some hobbles, earn renown' still feels enticing. The Boast system is also great fun, letting you bag more gold for stupid stuff like doing quests naked, not taking any damage, or not using weapons, just fists.

My childhood decisions don't have the weight Molyneux promised

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Like trying to read *Lord of the Rings* at a cider festival

EXPECT TO PAY
£27

DEVELOPER
Lionhead Studios

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/3ABMvNW

TELLING TALES

It's impossible to talk about *Fable* without some reference to Peter Molyneux's pre-release bombast. Many of us went into it expecting to be able to plant an acorn and watch it grow into a tree. The game doesn't allow quite that level of influence on the world, but the richness and depth is impressive when divorced from the initial hype. My childhood decisions don't have the weight Molyneux promised – not least because they're limited to 'find apples' and 'end childhood' – but other mechanics still impress. It's hard to criticise any game that lets me get plump by eating too many pies. Or more evil by devouring adorable chicks ("It's the bones that make them crunchy"). What could be seen as a limited system for good and evil by modern standards is now enjoyably binary, eliminating the stress of moral ambiguity by removing all doubt. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Still fiddly and obtuse, but *Fable's* weird, esoteric, arch-British strangeness make it a pleasure to go back to.

80

BELOW: Turn the game off here and the sadness can't hurt you.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£4

DEVELOPER
Moon Studios GmbH

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

TREESY LOVER

Heart-crushing sincerity in **ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST**

It would be easy to be massively cynical about *Ori and the Blind Forest*, with its withered trees and forest spirits and tragic coming-of-age narrative. It's achingly sincere. And it wastes no time before stamping on your worthless human heart, crafting vulnerable, loving protagonists who are immediately ripped apart. But raising even a slightly questioning eyebrow at such a wholesome game feels wrong, like armpit-farting cover versions of Enya songs. *Ori* deserves better.

We probably don't need to talk about how beautiful it all is, although it's worth pointing out that screenshots barely do it justice. There's a glowing, heartfelt warmth to it all that's like ASMR for the eyes. The arresting presentation is deceptive, too – it looks and sounds like the sort of

game where you hold right and a cosy story engulfs you. But *Ori and the Blind Forest* can be a spiteful, flinty game at times, with collectibles hanging near horribly-placed spikes and sections that require some trial and error to pass. It can also be a tricky game to get to grips with: the early sections present you with an array of dials, wheels, and abilities that could be drip-fed more elegantly.

The openness of it can be intimidating. As a Metroidvania it's entirely possible to traipse off in entirely the wrong direction before realising you haven't got the abilities you need to progress. Thematically, that openness feels right, hammering home the idea that you're lost in an uncharted fantasy landscape. And once Ori's arcane systems and open world begin to make sense, the result is really sublime. ■

86



JOTUN

Much like the weird, irresistible draw of Scandi interior design, certain games just have a pull. Sometimes all it takes to get me invested is an axe, some runes, and a mellifluous Northern European accent regaling me with tales of gods and giants and sacred wells. *Jotun* provides all these things and more, feeding me Norse myths while I scamper about hacking roots and thumping rocks. It's not taxing stuff – and the puzzles feel like they're dragging things out when I'd rather be bothering monsters – but there's a pleasantness to *Jotun* that's like the perfect minimalist chair in the corner of a neutral room. Simple but clean, like hygge for your eyes, fingers and thumbs. ■

68



OKAMI

There was a period during the late '90s when it was near-impossible to buy a T-shirt that didn't have a bold Japanese design emblazoned on the front. We rarely knew what they said. And we never looked as cool as we hoped. But revisiting the gorgeous, sumi-e artwork of *Okami* is a reminder of why we got obsessed in the first place. Much like this review, *Okami* has a languid start, but it's deeply compelling once you get into it – the sort of game where you'll want to paint over every maligned element with your magic brush just to get that sense of refreshing completion. And, unlike a shirt from 1997, *Okami* feels authentic, artistic and pleasing to revisit. ■

82



THE WOLF AMONG US

The Telltale formula is so established it's almost a modern fable itself, distilled and retold until little remains in our collective consciousness beyond the memes. But it's a system of interactive storytelling that still works, especially in a setting as compelling as Fabletown. The QTE fights feel slightly unsatisfying and some choices lack meaning, but everything else here has aged with dignity – the art style, in particular, still gels brilliantly with the noir-ish comic book setting. ■

80



GIVE THE GIFT OF XBOX



Xbox Game Pass Ultimate
DISCOVER YOUR NEXT
FAVOURITE GAME

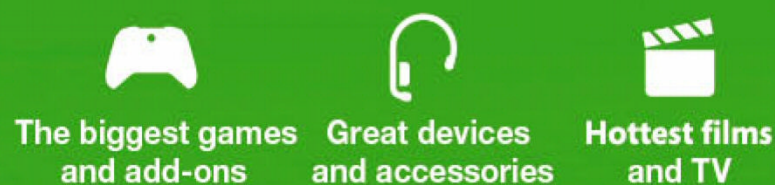


Includes all the benefits of Xbox Live Gold,
over 100 high-quality games for console, PC, and
Android mobile devices, plus an EA Play membership.

Xbox Game Pass: Terms and exclusions apply. Game catalogue varies over time, by region and by device. Not supported on Windows 10 in S mode and on ARM devices. See xbox.com/gamepass and ea.com/ea-play/terms and ea.com/ea-play for details.



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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOU DESERVE



96

GROUP TEST

Six 12th-gen motherboards tested and reviewed.



100

TECH REPORT

Is cloud streaming a threat to PC gaming as we know it?



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Three expert builds to help you get the most out of your budget.

GROUP TEST

INTEL 600-SERIES MOTHERBOARDS FOR 12TH GEN CPUs

A host of options to get the best out of your PC.

By Jacob Ridley, Chris Szewczyk

Intel's 12th Gen processors are stuffed with loads of new features, but they're also fit to burst last generation's motherboards, courtesy of their larger footprint. That means you need a new 600-series motherboard to put Alder Lake to use in your gaming PC, and we've tested the latest and greatest to help you narrow down your search.

You have a few motherboard chipsets to choose from: Z690, H670, H610, and B660. The most fully-featured of the lot are the Z690s, though they're also likely to be the most expensive. If you find they're out of your budget, you may want to look towards more gaming-focused B660 boards. These offer a tighter specification but maintain PCIe 4.0 support from the chipset, which means you can still utilise fast PCIe 4.0 NVMe SSDs to their fullest in your machine.



2



Z690 Aorus Pro

GIGABYTE £290

An actually affordable high-end Z690

1 By 2010's standards, the Gigabyte Z690 Aorus Pro would be positively pricey. In 2022, however, it's practically mid-range. The Z690 chipset has ushered in some of the priciest motherboard's known to man, but not the Aorus Pro. No, this motherboard is actually a little less than you might expect, and still manages to deliver a well-rounded feature set.

If you're planning a Core i9 12900K build, the one thing you need to know is whether your motherboard is going to be capable of running it without

issue. The Aorus Pro absolutely is. It comes with a stacked 16+3 phase VRM with 90A stages that is more than enough to power Intel's top chip, even if you're overclocking. Though it's also important to find adequate USB ports on the rear I/O. The Aorus Pro has you covered there, with 13 USB ports in total. If you're in the market for a high-end board, there's a lot on offer with the Aorus Pro at a good price.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Solid power delivery
- Four M.2 slots
- 13 I/O USB ports

SPECS SOCKET: INTEL LGA1700 / **FORM FACTOR:** ATX / **MEMORY SUPPORT:** UP TO DDR5-6200(OC) / **STORAGE:** 4X M.2; 6X SATA / **USB:** UP TO 2X USB 3.2 GEN2X2, 4X USB 3.2 GEN2, 6X USB 3.1 GEN1, 8X USB 2.0 / **DISPLAY:** 1X DP 1.4 / **NETWORKING:** INTEL WI-FI 6E; INTEL I225V 2.5G LAN / **AUDIO:** REALTEK ALC4080 7.1 CHANNEL HD AUDIO

Z690 Taichi

ASROCK £530

Bragging rights included in the box

2 The ASRock Z690 Taichi is teetering on the edge of extreme. There are some truly mind-bogglingly expensive Z690 motherboards out there, and the Taichi isn't far off being one of them. It's a flashy board for someone with more money than components to spend it on, but it is at least worth considering. There's a slimmer selection of USB ports on the Taichi than on the Gigabyte Aorus Pro, though there's some serious bandwidth on offer with the twin Thunderbolt 4 ports. One Thunderbolt USB hub and you're sorted for USB ports for your

PC's lifetime, though that would be asking for more money to burn. The Taichi delivers in other ways, though. It comes with a 20-phase, 105A-stage VRM, which is truly overkill for whatever processor you load into the Taichi. Then you have the slight performance lead in benchmarking, if only by a hair. Lastly, it looks fantastic, and that has to count for something if you're spending this much money.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Dual Thunderbolt 4 Type-C ports
- Mega VRM
- Good networking capabilities

SPECS SOCKET: INTEL LGA1700 / **FORM FACTOR:** ATX / **STORAGE:** 3X M.2; 6X SATA / **USB:** 2X / **THUNDERBOLT** 4 TYPE-C; UP TO 1X USB 3.2 GEN2X2, 2X USB 3.2 GEN2, 9X USB 3.1 GEN1, 3X USB 2.0 / **VIDEO OUT:** 1X HDMI / **NETWORKING:** KILLER WI-FI 6E; KILLER E3100G 2.5G AND INTEL I219V 1G LAN / **AUDIO:** REALTEK ALC1220 7.1 CHANNEL HD AUDIO

GROUP TEST

THE MSI COMES WITH SERIOUS POWER DELIVERY



3

MPG Z690 Carbon WIFI

MSI **£410**

On the edge of expensive

3 An MSI Carbon motherboard is never a bad bet. Each one I've used has been built to a high standard and comes with a competitive set of features. Much like the other Z690 motherboards we've tested, the MSI comes with serious power delivery. The Carbon's VRM is made up of 18+2 phase design with 75A stages. That's not as powerful in raw current as the 105A boards, but those really are overkill for most gamers. Simply put: the MSI won't run into issue with any 12th Gen chip. MSI has also fitted 10 USB ports to the

rear I/O of the Carbon, which is a little slimmer than some, but makes up for it with plenty of capacity for speedy SSDs thanks to five M.2 NVMe slots.

The MSI MPG Z690 Gaming Carbon is a solid Z690 motherboard, but that's at its launch price. If it trends downwards in price over the next few months relative to its competitors, it might begin to really stand out.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Five M.2 slots available
- Decent value, relatively speaking
- Solid VRM configuration

SPECS SOCKET: INTEL LGA1700 / **FORM FACTOR:** ATX / **STORAGE:** 5X M.2; 6X SATA / **USB:** UP TO 1X USB 3.2 GEN2X2, 6X USB 3.2 GEN2, 2X USB 3.1 GEN1, 8X USB 2.0 / **VIDEO OUT:** 1X HDMI 2.1, 1X DP 1.4 / **NETWORKING:** INTEL WI-FI 6E; INTEL I225V 2.5G LAN / **AUDIO:** REALTEK ALC4080 7.1 CHANNEL HD AUDIO

ROG Maximus Z690 Apex

ASUS **£570**

Professional overclockers only

4 Most of us will glance at the Asus ROG Maximum Z690 Apex's price tag and then immediately elsewhere. It's understandable, as it is one of the most expensive motherboards we've ever tested. It's also one of the most well-made, though what more makes it worth that gargantuan pile of cash is up for debate.

Asus has fitted the Apex Z690 with a 24+2 VRM with 105A stages, which puts it at the cutting-edge of VRM design. You can safely overclock any 12th Gen chip to its limit, though you'd probably be doing yourself a

disservice by not running an Intel Core i9 12900K. Since this motherboard is tailored to overclocking, it only comes with two DDR5 DIMM slots. Though the more gaming-focused user may find solace in its ability to fit up to five NVMe SSDs, through the use of the included PCIe 5.0 add-in card. That said, there's not a great deal in this board for gamers, and that makes it terribly difficult to recommend.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Bulletproof build quality and VRM
- PCIe 5.0 M.2 card included
- Overkill for the vast majority of users

SPECS SOCKET: INTEL LGA1700 / **FORM FACTOR:** ATX / **STORAGE:** 5X M.2; 6X SATA / **USB:** UP TO 2X USB 3.2 GEN2X2, 5X USB 3.2 GEN2, 8X USB 3.1 GEN1, 4X USB 2.0 / **NETWORKING:** INTEL WI-FI 6E; INTEL I225V 2.5G LAN / **AUDIO:** REALTEK ALC4080 7.1 CHANNEL HD AUDIO



IS WI-FI 6E WORTH IT FOR GAMERS?

Wi-Fi 6E is the latest wireless technology on PC. It takes the benefits of WiFi 6, which include higher data rates, capacity, multi-device performance, and power efficiency; and adds support for the 6GHz frequency. That extends opens up whole new channels for high-speed communication for your PC and games.

So in a way, yes, Wi-Fi 6E is immediately worth it for gamers. That's especially true if you're in a congested networking area where a whole other frequency could work wonders for connection speed and stability. The good news is that Intel is integrating Wi-Fi 6E support directly into its 12th Gen platform, though there are a few catches if you want to make the most of Wi-Fi 6E.

For starters, Intel including Wi-Fi 6E support doesn't mean you'll find Wi-Fi 6E on every compatible motherboard. You will also need to ensure your router is also compatible with Wi-Fi 6E to use it, so think about your entire wireless ecosystem before you let Wi-Fi 6E support influence your decision.

Gaming tests are run at 1080p at medium to high settings to remove any bottlenecks caused by graphics card performance. When relevant, both single- and dual-graphics card configurations are tested to ensure motherboard stability in SLI and Crossfire situations.

B660M Mortar WiFi DDR4

MSI £170

Affordable board with high-end performance

5 There are Z690 motherboards around the £200 mark, but they are few and far between and pretty damned sparse in terms of features. But this MSI B660M – the M stands for Micro ATX because it's a little mobo – is able to deliver the same stock performance from a top-end Core i9 12900K CPU and comes with a healthy feature set, too.

It's a DDR4 board as well, which means you don't have to spend big on the unreasonably pricey and hard-to-find DDR5 modules. Just grab a low latency DDR4 kit at 3,200MHz or above

and you'll be laughing. You also get Wi-Fi 6, so you get the wireless speed without the premium price of the only slightly quicker Wi-Fi 6E. This board is capable of keeping up with a Core i9 chip which means i5 CPUs are going to be a perfect match. There's no overclocking here, so you're not going to be getting 5GHz+ out of your Core i5 12400, but it will be a great platform for an affordable new gaming rig.

PC GAMER VERDICT

→ Can tame a stock i9 12900K
→ Cheap DDR4 support
→ Decent USB complement

SPECS SOCKET: INTEL LGA1700 / FORM FACTOR: MICRO ATX / STORAGE: 2X M.2; 6X SATA / USB: UP TO 2X USB 3.2 GEN2 TYPE-C; 3X USB 3.2 GEN2; 2X USB 3.2 GEN1; UP TO 8X USB 2.0 / VIDEO OUT: 1X HDMI 2.1; 1X DP 1.4 / NETWORKING: INTEL WI-FI 6; REALTEK 2.5G LAN / AUDIO: REALTEK ALC1200 7.1 CHANNEL HD AUDIO

B660M DS3H AX DDR4

GIGABYTE £119

Real basic board for the low end

6 There are always limits when it comes to budget boards, and more so with cheaper versions of a budget chipset. But, while the Gigabyte board is most definitely basic, it has at least tried to ensure the necessary features are present and correct. The mATX form factor means this wee board doesn't have space for more PCIe slots, and you only get two M.2 ports for SSDs, but that's OK in a mainstream gaming PC.

You also get Intel's Wi-Fi 6 wireless tech, which is plenty fast, along with a pretty standard 2.5Gbps LAN connection. More

of a concern is the paucity of USB ports on the back panel, and even in the internal headers. That and the ultra basic BIOS menu, which I found a nightmare to access.

Though this is not a board you can pair with an i9 for serious multi-threading tasks – its VRMs don't have the goods to give it the juice needed for long term performance – for games, it's not an issue, and will happily keep your GPU fed no matter what it is.

PC GAMER VERDICT

→ Affordable price
→ DDR4 support
→ Limited USB

SPECS SOCKET: INTEL LGA1700 / FORM FACTOR: MICRO ATX / STORAGE: 2X M.2; 4X SATA / USB: 1X USB 3.2 GEN2 TYPE-C; 5X USB 3.2 GEN1 TYPE-A, 6X USB 2.0 TYPE-A / VIDEO OUT: 1X HDMI, 2X DP 1.4 / NETWORKING: INTEL WI-FI 6; REALTEK 2.5G LAN / AUDIO: REALTEK 7.1 CHANNEL HD AUDIO

Spooky rooms like this one facilitate cloud streaming.

CLOUD STRIFE

Streaming services threaten the PC's place in PC gaming

GeForce Now actually works. Let's just take a second for that statement to permeate: after a decade of embarrassing showings from cloud gaming services like OnLive and Gaikai that always showed us games smeared in vaseline and with the reaction speeds of a tectonic plate, there's now one that really does let you play top-end PC games using the strength of your internet connection alone.

Well, that and a server farm full of RTX 3080s, which we've had a famously hard time getting our hands on at consumer level since release. Still, it's a profound achievement on technological terms – the two-way transfer of data that can manage precisely timed inputs and high resolution rendered frames at the same time, producing an experience that feels like something close to PC gaming.

Though not indiscernible, of course. Running a game locally, even on technically inferior hardware to the components within Nvidia's fantastically titled SuperPODs, produces sharper image quality and noticeably more responsive inputs, especially if you're fortunate enough to have even a first-gen RTX card. And for some of us, that slight discrepancy is enough. PC gaming's never been the preserve of players who can just sit and be fine with minuscule fidelity compromises.

It's awfully close, though, particularly if you're using Nvidia's top-tier monthly service – which is only accessible via a £90 payment for six months' access to RTX 3080-equipped cloud power. And the fact that the graphics giant has refined this tech during a period when the supply chain between consumer and graphics card has been severely disrupted is enough to give anyone a wandering eye to this other world of PC gaming. PC gaming without the PC.

Even Microsoft is getting in on the action. The top tier of its Xbox Game Pass includes a similar streaming function, although its own server farms are running gaggles of Xbox Series Xs, which doesn't conjure quite so impressive an image. But the latency is minimal, the games library is vast, and the onscreen fidelity is at least passable. With not one but two giants bearing down on the physical PC's relevance – something you'd imagine both Nvidia and Microsoft would have a deep and vested interest in – a future in which we don't need any local hardware beyond a screen and peripherals seems to have already arrived. And the weird thing is, you're probably feeling sad about it.

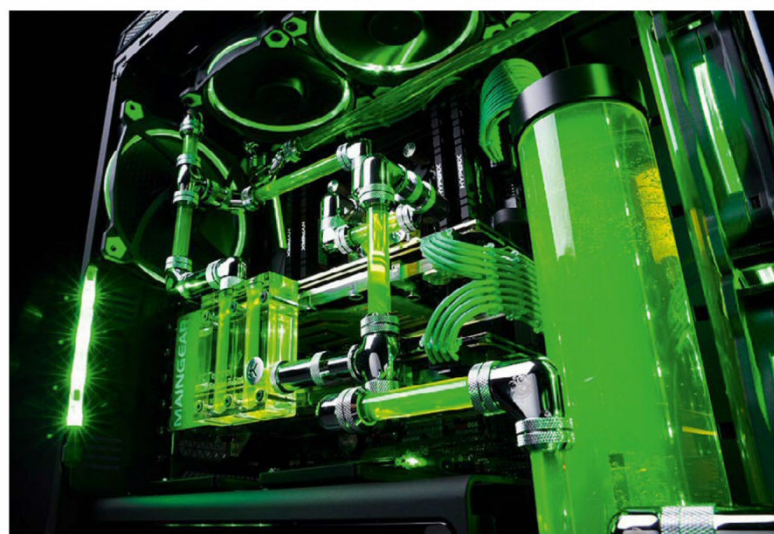
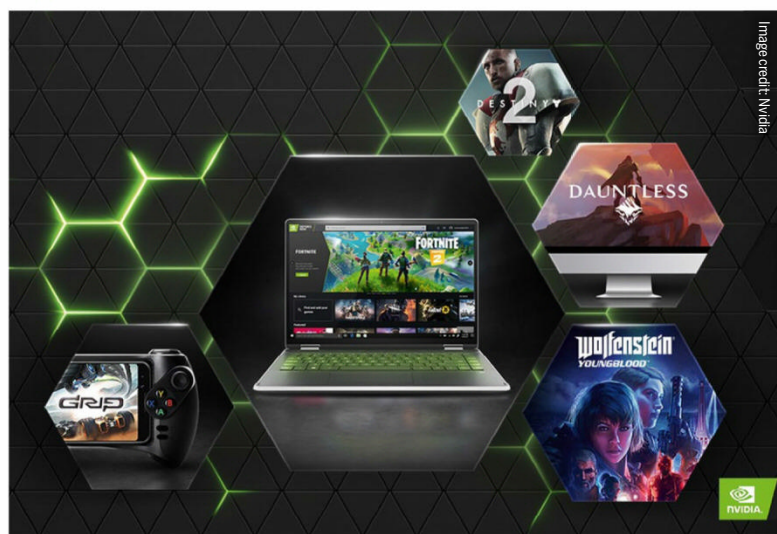
IT'S FOR 'HOMEWORK'

Perhaps it has something to do with PC gaming's origins in those friendly beige home computers our families bought and set up in the spare room so that we could use Encarta and type up especially well-researched homework reports.



POD in the machine

Nvidia's SuperPODs are serious slabs of hardware. The Bluefield 2 data processing units within them can handle everything from conversational AI to self-driving cars, and they interface with a range of DGX supercomputer systems for which running a game really quickly is like tying their shoelace.



FAR LEFT: GeForce Now wants to disrupt PC gaming. And if it does, we all win.

LEFT: Custom cases and cooling systems are the real victims here.

DREAM SETUP *The money-no-object streaming rig*



MONITOR

An incredibly lavish monitor, since you don't need to buy a GPU. Heck, you could even splash out on an ultra-wide one.



CONTROLLER

An Xbox Elite controller for the final, unnecessarily decadent touch. Put those levers to good use.



WI-FI

A Wi-Fi 6 router and receiver to keep those frames coming in at a sprint, and so you don't complain about lag.



HEADPHONES

Audiophile-grade headphones with the spare change from the above so you can really hear the online heckling.

The PC's beginnings as a gaming platform couldn't be further from /r/pcmasterrace rhetoric – playing games on a desktop machine in the '90s was actually a subversive experience that turned our multimedia centres into something almost unintended. They looked like the desk furniture of any office, but there they were running *Command & Conquer* for us while we could still ostensibly be doing our homework. By contrast, games consoles trimmed away all the multimedia fat and delivered something wholly for gaming. As a value proposition, that made them the more decadent, trickier to ascertain consumer item.

For many of us, much of the fondness for the PC as a platform is couched in that setting. Not simply a box below the telly, the PC was somewhere you devoted some significant part of an entire room to. Indeed, your hand was forced – by the time you'd stuffed a bulky CRT screen, a desktop tower the size of a hatchback, a printer and a mouse and keyboard into one place, little else would be taking place in that room. Playing on the PC meant going off to a private little nook of the house, ensconcing oneself in beige and escaping to a virtual world.

The idea of cutting out this nostalgic and outdated middle-man, then, seems like some kind of affront to our interest on a fundamental level. There's no longer any mandate to keep a corner of our home just for gaming, since all a cloud gaming service needs is an internet connection, a screen, tablet, or smartphone and some kind of input device. There's no need to have a clearly defined RGB colour scheme. And if you're living with the tiny fidelity and latency

compromise of GeForce Now, you might as well chuck out that esports-grade mouse and n-key rollover mechanical keyboard and just use a wireless Surface mouse and keyboard instead. Why does this feel like reciting bible verse backwards over an animal sacrifice?

THE HARDCORE WINS

Probably because in the years since we brought those first PCs into our homes, a certain subset's elitist posturing has tarnished the platform with noxious ideas about 'true'

gamers being the ones privileged enough to invest thousands on a hobby. And perhaps the best thing about GeForce Now, and Xbox Game Pass, is that it's disruptive to that culture. PC gaming is now accessible to anyone who can afford a monthly subscription, a fast internet connection, and a compatible device. Not a trifle of a minimum spec set, but certainly a much

lower barrier for entry than the outlay required to run *Cyberpunk 2077* above 10fps.

The games industry is booming right now, and traditional gaming has almost nothing to do with that revenue surge. Instead it's mobile gaming in emerging markets – people previously kept at arm's length from gaming by budget and availability, proving they're just as passionate as someone with a curved 144Hz IPS. Cloud services make PC titles part of that boom, since they're suddenly playable on smartphones, and for PC gamers who'll never ditch their towers, that's great news too. Suddenly developers have a far bigger market to reach, and greater profits to reap.

Phil Iwaniuk

PLAYING ON THE PC MEANT GOING OFF TO A PRIVATE LITTLE NOOK OF THE HOUSE

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

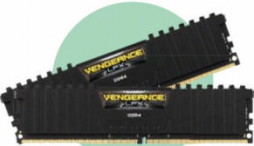
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£792

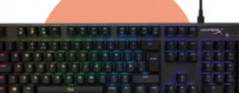
MOTHERBOARD		B550 Gaming X AM4 Gigabyte £99 This motherboard offers two display outs to support our choice of chip, while also delivering a modest selection of USB ports.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 5600G AMD £265 This is a little pricier than we'd like, but it's one of few viable budget options that avoids a discrete graphics card for gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Stealth AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Stealth is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trusty manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,500

MOTHERBOARD	 NEW ENTRY	B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR	 NEW ENTRY	Core i5 12400 Intel £170 Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER	 NEW ENTRY	Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £30 Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 12th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£4,501

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z690 Carbon WiFi MSI £410 This MSI motherboard offers a mix of high-end features, plentiful ports, and DDR5 support, without an extreme price tag.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 12900K Intel £599 Intel's Core i9 12900K represents Alder Lake's finest chip, and it's one hell of a processor for whatever you might throw at it.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB Corsair £290 A new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. The Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB is blisteringly quick.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £120 Though technically this platform support PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



"They're just taking a nap, Hugo."

"Sometimes you just have to fight, but there are also avoidable deaths"

Playing **A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE** during an actual plague was not a horrible time

It's two years into the pandemic and I must have lost it, because I decided to finally play *A Plague Tale: Innocence*. I'm not a fan of children or plagues, so I'm not sure what inspired me to fire up this stealth romp, but I'm actually glad I did.

For all the flesh-eating rats, inquisitors, and, yes, magic, *A Plague Tale* is really about a pair of siblings who don't know each other coming together after their lives are upturned. Maybe my nephews have softened me up, because I did not hate spending a couple of days with Amicia and her wee brother Hugo.

Amicia is a capable kid with a streak of hotheadedness, and the game's protagonist, charged to look after a brother she's hardly ever seen. Hugo is essentially a puppy –

FRASER BROWN



THIS MONTH
Learned a lot about how evil rats are.

ALSO PLAYED
Pupperazzi,
Paratopic

completely innocent and eager to make some new pals. He might have spent most of his life sick and stuck in one room, but he still manages to be a source of constant optimism. He's an adorable wee lad.

While you'll play some other characters in specific sections, Amicia is who you'll spend most of your time with, and while it's not explicit, it does feel like you're being judged by the example you're setting for Hugo. There might be an army of zealots and an ocean of rats after you, but you've still got to be a good big sister.

RATS OFF

After I was forced to kill a big bloke with a hammer, Amicia was so affected by it that I wasn't keen to kill again, especially with Hugo watching. Sometimes you just have to fight, but there are also avoidable deaths.

The first was an injured enemy, lying at the end of a corridor, with a little army of rats between us. Using fire, which the rats hate, I could move them away from me and get to the exit, but in doing so the rats would be pushed to the other end of the corridor, where they'd feast on the soldier. But I noticed an unlit torch near him, so I used alchemy

AMICIA WAS SO AFFECTED BY IT THAT I WASN'T KEEN TO KILL AGAIN



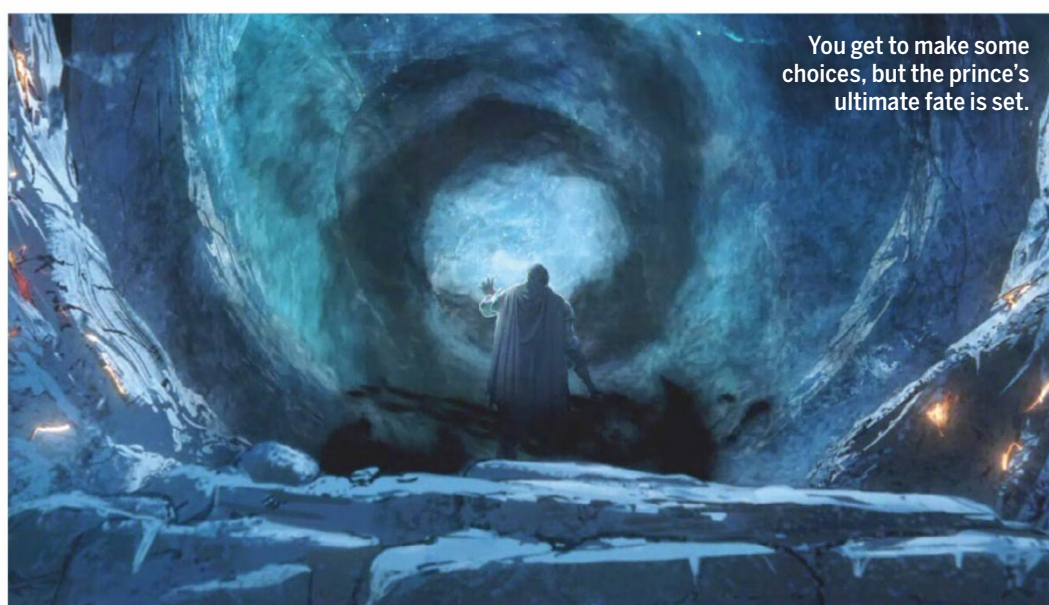
Don't worry – you don't need to carry him everywhere.

and my extremely handy sling to light it, protecting him from the rats while we made our escape.

Trying to avoid killing whenever possible forced me to use all of my alchemical skills and stealth, bringing out the slight but still engaging puzzle side of *A Plague Tale*. And this continued, even after I discovered that the game doesn't actually give a shit how you overcome its obstacles.

Hugo and other characters do comment on deaths you're responsible for, and clearly Amicia is being hardened by her harrowing experiences, but there's no karma or alignment system, and no way to influence Hugo beyond what's scripted. Part of me was disappointed that all this stuff pushing me to set a good example was illusory, but while it didn't have a tangible impact on Hugo or the game's ending, it did create a lot of tension, and made it much easier to think of myself as this protective sibling wrestling with this unexpected responsibility.

I'm glad it didn't punish me for the times when bloodlust took hold, and when the nightmare was over, I felt like I'd been a great sister, and that Hugo was happy because of the decisions I made, even if it was always going to end this way. ■



You get to make some choices, but the prince's ultimate fate is set.

“A gentler ramp into the series”

Leadership training in **TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III**

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Discovered the strategic value of big, angry bears.

ALSO PLAYED
Pathfinder: Kingmaker,
Strange Horticulture

I've always been dreadful at the *Total War* games. Neither the real-time battles nor the wider strategy of conquering the map have ever felt quite under my control, and I've always ended up burning out from sheer incompetence.

That was fine back when they were all historical – I just avoided them, because Romans and Napoleons are boring. But ever since Creative Assembly started making some of the best Warhammer games on PC, it's been painful to my brand to not be able to embrace the series.

Dutifully I booted up *Total War: Warhammer III*, expecting to once again revel in the attention to detail of its grim fantasy world, but barely scratch the surface of its tactical depth. But lo! CA may have finally found a way to bring even a fool like myself into the fold.

Before you get started with the game's campaign, you're invited to play a prologue. This mini-campaign leads you through the events that kicked off the main story – namely a Kislevite prince's journey to find a missing bear god.

GRIN AND BEAR IT

Narratively, it provides a lovely bit of context before you start empire-building in earnest. But, more importantly, it serves as a gentler mechanical ramp into the game than the series has ever had before.

Rather than a full map, the prologue takes place along a linear chasm of frozen mountains. The series' usual complexities are stripped right down to bare bones, and gradually reintroduced as you progress. Battles start simple, and as they add more unit types and grow in scale, the game explains the logic of each piece of the strategy jigsaw.

'Yep, that's what a tutorial is,' you might say, snarkily, but this feels far cleverer than just that. Together the tightened scope, carefully constructed scenarios, and even the story being told provide a brilliantly accessible window into an intimidating series.

Jumping from there into the main campaign, I discover that I'm still rubbish. But I now feel like I know how to get better. The ideas the prologue taught me are the foundation I needed to start learning as I go, playing with mechanics I now understand the context of. I might conquer the Old World yet. ■



“It’s an absurd showpiece, backed by lore-appropriate rock music”

Becoming a **GUILD WARS 2** tour guide

Atop a crag amid the mountains beside Grothmar Valley, the band begins to play. “We are Metal Legion,” croaks frontman Varus Chainrazor, “and we’re here to put the ‘band’ back in ‘warband’”. Beside me, Fraser is losing his mind.

I never expected my friends to give *Guild Wars 2* an earnest try. As a longtime player, I would jokingly suggest it as our weekly co-op gaming group bounced between various games. When our interest in any one waned, I’d mention the good times we could be having in Tyria.

Eventually, it worked. In late-2021, a handful of current and former PC Gamer staffers downloaded the game. As the veteran, it was now my responsibility to keep them playing.

My tactic was to take it slow: to gradually portion out the game’s best and most surprising encounters. As of writing – just before the the *End of Dragons* expansion – *Guild Wars 2* has 52 maps. And because, in its nine years of operation, it has never raised the level cap, most of them are populated to at least some degree.

▶ **PHIL SAVAGE**



THIS MONTH
Pushed an addiction upon some friends.

ALSO PLAYED
Destiny 2

BOSS RUSH

And so, as the new arrivals level their characters, I suggest a field trip to the swamps of Queensdale. Here, they meet one of *Guild Wars 2*’s world bosses – giant monsters that spawn as a dynamic event out in the open world. The shadow behemoth isn’t a difficult fight, but it does look impressive as a swarm of players converge to take down a dark beast.

I waited a few weeks before the next big reveal: the Shatterer. Also an open world boss, and also a relatively easy fight, the Shatterer still stands out because it’s the first of *Guild Wars*

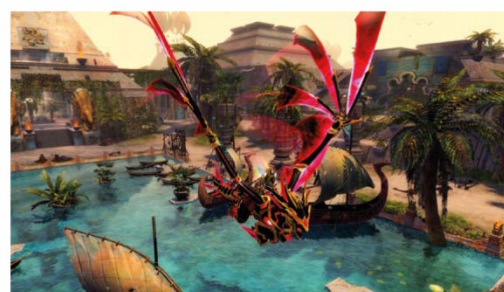
2’s dragon bosses – an imposing spectacle that feels satisfying to kill.

Hitting the level cap unlocks a new style of open world activity: meta-events, where hundreds of players work across an entire map. They take part in a Charr civil war, where players slowly earn control of a map in a lengthy, brutal struggle. And then, when they finally think they know what the game is all about, I take them to a concert.

Grothmar Valley is the site of a big Charr party. In one of its four meta-events, players must help the rock band Metal Legion. As players successfully complete each task, the crowd’s excitement builds.

It ends in a dragon fight. Pyrotorrick – a pyrotechnic metal construct modelled after the Elder Dragon Kralkatorrik – malfunctions. It’s an absurd and spectacular showpiece, backed by lore-appropriate rock music. MMO discussion is usually dominated by talk of grind; of reward structures and progressions systems. But introducing new people to an MMO that you’re familiar with is a great reminder of the simple joys that these massive worlds can contain. ■

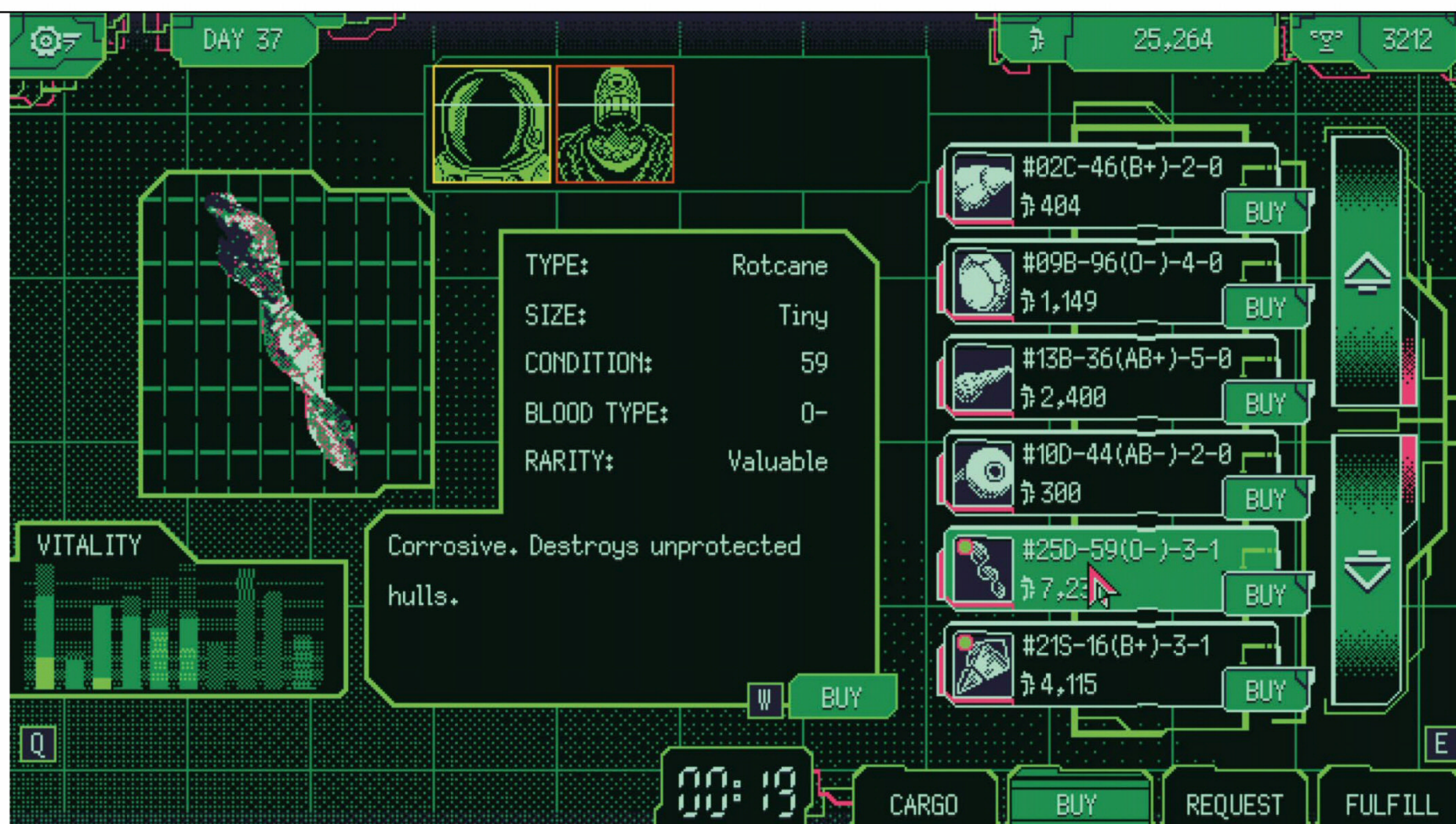
HITTING THE LEVEL CAP UNLOCKS A NEW STYLE OF OPEN WORLD ACTIVITY



FAR LEFT: A stirring rendition of classic rock anthem *Bound by Blood*.

BELOW: Pyrotorrick attacks.





“It’s a race to compete with other traders to fill commissions”

Emotional, economical bungee jumping in **SPACE WARLORD ORGAN TRADING SIMULATOR**

At so many points, my main response to *Space Warlord Organ Trading Simulator* is, “Thanks! I hate it.” It’s that moment of recognising something presented to you is awful and compelling. There’s a touch of the archaic definition of the word ‘awful’, straddling both reverence and dread.

Like Strange Scaffold’s previous *An Airport for Aliens Currently Run by Dogs*, the premise of *Space Warlord Organ Trading Simulator* is stated upfront. As your mentor lays out at the start of the game, “Everyone has organs, everyone wants organs, and everyone needs organs, which means THEY NEED YOU.” Even with its visceral stakes firmly set, I wasn’t quite prepared for one of the first things I saw to be a counter ticking up the number of breaths I’d taken. Not from an in-game mechanic, but as a measure of my own mortal time.

Lungs sell for a decent chunk of money, in *Space Warlord Organ Trading Simulator*. It doesn’t say

RUTH CASSIDY



THIS MONTH
Sold a surplus liver at a loss because I needed cargo room.

ALSO PLAYED
Death's Door,
Trials of Fire

whose lungs, or from where, or how they were acquired, but then I don’t know that about most things I buy. What I can see is how much they buy and sell for, even if the point of origin is abstract. In one life, a warehouse. In another: organ barge.

1,000 BREATHS LATER

One day the organ barge brings only lungs, which throws a spanner in that day’s trading. A day is two minutes long, and it’s a race to compete with other traders to fill commissions. The

I INVESTED IN PENNY STOCKS, GUESSING THAT THEY WOULD INCREASE IN VALUE

TOP: Rotcane – cauterises wounds and eats your hull.

list moves quickly, with sales getting sniped out from under you, so the market getting flooded with lungs only makes it harder to sift through for the brain I was looking for.

Outside of moment to moment buying and selling, *SWOTS* has a stock market. I won’t claim financial expertise, but the aphorism to ‘buy low, sell high’ sticks. I invested in penny stocks, guessing that they would increase in value at some point. And they did! When, in the wider world, a truce was ended, and the value of every single organ shot up. I tabbed around noticing the identical spike in previously disparate charts, grimacing at the implications – but the worst part of me wished I’d realised that the truce had been a dip before it was already over.

Playing *Space Warlord Organ Trading Simulator* is much like how I imagine bungee jumping. At its full extent, its adrenaline all the way down, only to recoil with a sickening lurch from the complicit horror of it all, knowing I’ll plunge back into its depths. It’s smart and compulsive to play: thanks! I hate it. ■



HUNT: SHOWDOWN

Hunt's latest update makes an old gun feel new again. *By Morgan Park*

In a time when every multiplayer game around operates on a regular seasonal schedule, complete with battle passes and all sorts, I kind of miss the days when games would just randomly get cool patches with new stuff. There's a spontaneity to the surprise patch that makes even smaller additions feel special, and the closest I get to this feeling today is in *Hunt: Showdown*, which recently received an interesting set of new gun variants, and some significant balance changes.

Crytek does give players a heads-up when an update is on the way, but the lack of a fixed schedule means I was pleasantly surprised to boot up the game a few weeks ago and find three new variants of the Scottfield Model 3 revolver waiting to try out: the Scottfield Swift, Scottfield Spitfire, and the Scottfield Precision. I've given all three a whirl and, boy howdy, it turns out this ageing six shooter has some fantastic new tricks up its metal sleeve.

The base Scottfield hasn't been a favourite of mine since it was released a few months ago. It's based on the real-life Schofield revolver that you might recognise from the *Red Dead* games. The Scottfield is a cool gun in a game full of other cool guns – a break-action revolver with the unique ability to evacuate all of

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 22, 2018

DEVELOPER
Crytek

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
huntshowdown.com

its spent rounds at once and reload faster as a result.

That and its hard-hitting medium ammo made it a good pick for low-cost loadouts, but it still pales against the Caldwell Pax revolver's superior velocity. There wasn't much of a reason to pick a Scottfield over a Pax until 1.7.2's new variants came in. Now, I can spend a few extra hunt dollars on a Scottfield with a precision stock. A rifle stock hanging off the end of a dinky little revolver looks as goofy as it sounds, but paired with full metal jacket ammo, the Scottfield Precision becomes a gnarly sharpshooter that can pick off enemies dozens of metres away. The recoil is so soft on this bad boy that I've been able to challenge rifle users at range and win! (Sometimes, at least.)

DEEP POCKETS

More often, though, I think I'll be taking the Scottfield Spitfire, a unique variant for the gun with a shorter barrel and improved trigger guard that lets users cock the hammer faster and significantly increase its fire rate. The big trade off here is you're taking a serious drop in accuracy, but the Spitfire

cycles rounds so fast that it rivals the double-action Nagant Officer revolver for sheer amount of bullets in the air. The Officer's ease of use has made it one of the most popular guns in *Hunt: Showdown* for as long as I've played it, so it's nice to have a medium ammo alternative that certainly feels distinct.

I'm also keen to try dual wielding the Spitfire and doubling its already fast output, but I've been somewhat deterred by patch 1.7.2's nerf to accuracy for that kind of two-fisted action. Double pistols no longer get an accuracy bonus from crouching and have more recoil. The recoil hasn't been a huge deal for me so far, but the crouch nerf really hurts. I



I'VE BEEN ABLE TO CHALLENGE RIFLE USERS AT RANGE AND WIN!

haven't spent as much time with the Scottfield Swift because, as neat as it is to reload a six shooter with a speed loader like *Overwatch's* Cassidy, the Swift is otherwise just a normal Scottfield. Don't get me wrong – that's not a bad thing by any stretch of the imagination. It speaks to the strength of *Hunt: Showdown's* weapon store that Crytek can make relatively minor tweaks to old guns and end up with variants that behave more or less like completely new firearms.

Crytek gets a lot of bang for its buck, though I don't think I'll be dropping my bucks on the other big variant of the 1.7.2 patch: the Berthier Mle 92 Deadeye. *Hunt's* newest rifle now has a scope, and it's probably going to be scary good in action. The Berthier's hefty \$362 price tag has kept me from using it much in the months it's been out, though I do really love the idea of its nifty three-round cartridge that can be rapidly reloaded if you have the patience to fire all three shots first.

If you haven't tried out *Hunt: Showdown* for yourself yet then all this revolver rambling probably sounds like nonsense. It's one of the best competitive shooters out there right now, a horror battle royale full of clever twists and featuring the most unique arsenal of guns in the biz. A revolver with a stock is only the tip of the iceberg, I assure you. ■

GUN CASE

How to pick the best six shooter for every situation



SCOTTFIELD SPITFIRE

- ⊕ Hits hard for a pistol
- ⊕ Fires fast
- ⊖ Big recoil



NAGANT OFFICER

- ⊕ Fastest gun for the price
- ⊕ Great for headshots
- ⊖ Low damage



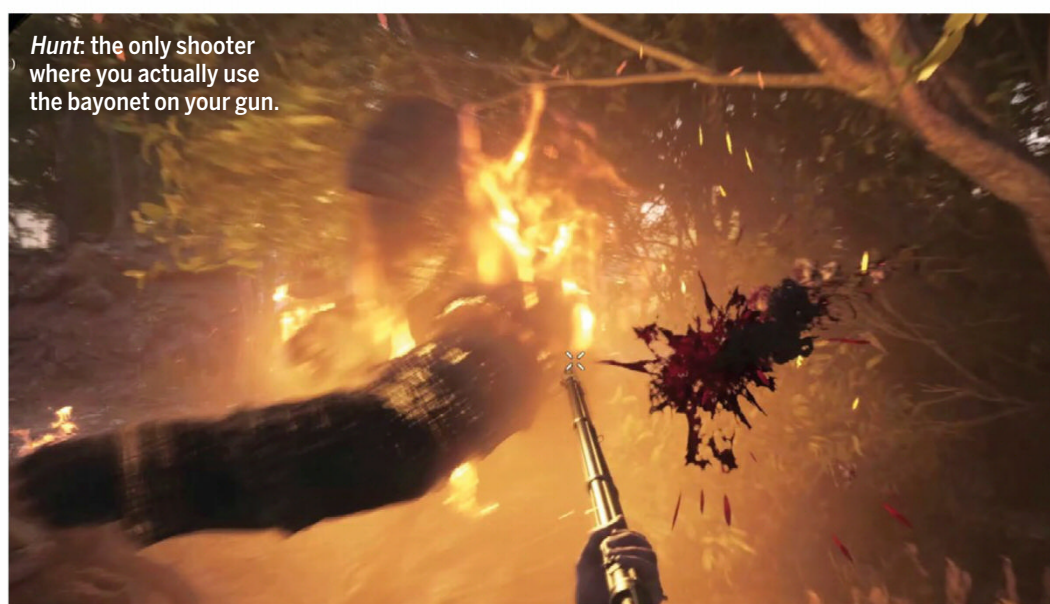
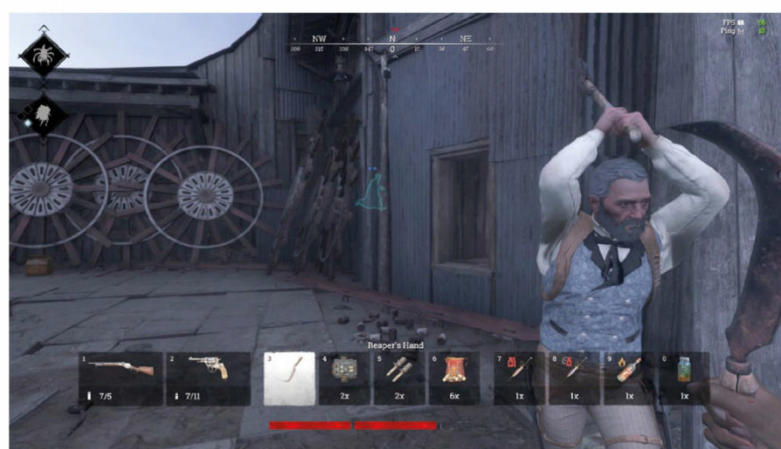
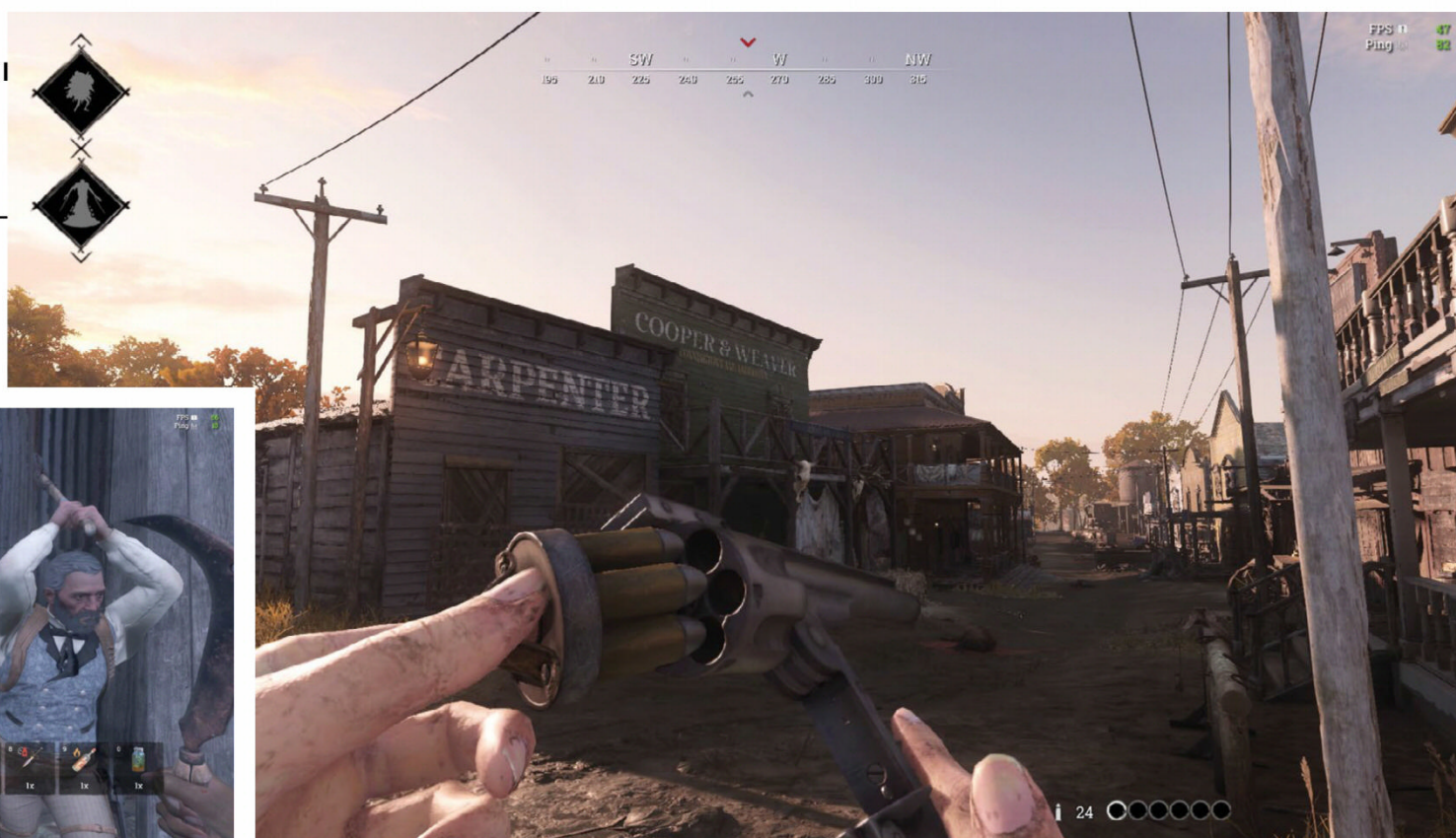
CALDWELL PAX

- ⊕ Looks cool
- ⊕ Basically a faster Scottfield
- ⊖ Slower reload than other guns

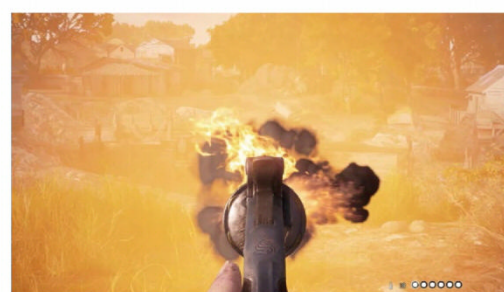


SCOTTFIELD PRECISION

- ⊕ Very accurate
- ⊕ Fast fire rate
- ⊖ Takes up a medium slot



Hunt: the only shooter where you actually use the bayonet on your gun.



ABOVE: Loading six bullets at a time in the late 1800s? That's revolutionary.

LEFT: This shot hit a guy, I promise.



Don't mind me, just firing lead into an American sunset.

If the bar had coasters
I wouldn't have to
scrub so hard.



ABOVE: They belong to the swamp now.

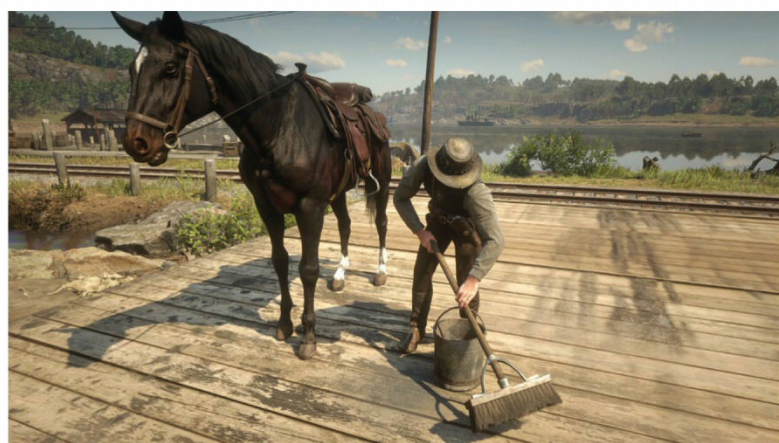
This is gonna come up at
my performance review,
I just know it.





BELOW: I don't think this water is clean enough to clean anything.

BOTTOM: Did I miss a spot? I missed a spot.



JOBS MOD

Some honest work in Red Dead 2. *By Christopher Livingston*

Every outlaw, at one point or another, tries to walk the straight and narrow path. Retire from crime and go legit. Get a real job. With the *Jobs Mod for Red Dead Redemption 2*, you can give your outlaw a chance to start over, not as a bank robber or loan shark, but as an honest working Joe. Or, you can try.

I didn't find it all that easy to keep my outlaw out of trouble, even with the nice selection of jobs the mod adds to the game. No matter what I tried – bartender, sheep herder, delivery man, miner, dock worker – I just couldn't keep jobs from going wrong. As the saying goes, you can take the cowboy out of the gang, but you can't take the gang out of the cowboy.

DOCK ROCK

I start with something that sounds easy and peaceful: a dockworker at the quiet and cruddy town of Annesburg. The mod adds new icons to the map: if you see a yellow icon indicating an anchor, that means you can find a boss at that location and ask them for work. This boss sends me over to the dock to do some fishing, which is something I've done

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 5, 2019

DEVELOPER
Rockstar Studios

PUBLISHER
Rockstar Games

LINK
bit.ly/3KNJUFn

plenty of times in *RDR2*, though something about the oily waters off the coast of Annesburg means that despite casting my line and trying to tempt a fish, I keep coming up empty. My shift ends and I have absolutely nothing to show for it. So, I go back to the boss and ask for another chance at earning a wage.

UNLIKE MY USUAL WORK IN RDR2, NOBODY IS GETTING HURT

This time I'm instructed to head down to the water and fill up a bucket, then bring it back up to the boardwalk, dump it out, and scrub the dusty planks with a broom. I do that for a while, though again I have to note that Annesburg's water is absolutely disgusting and oily, and since my horse insists on following me onto the boardwalk and wiping his hooves all over it, I seriously doubt all this labour is really helping clean anything at all. But work is work, and unlike my usual work in *RDR2*, nobody is getting hurt.

That is, until I decide I've had enough of walking to the water, filling up that bucket, and scrubbing the planks of the boardwalk. My shift isn't over but I've cleaned four separate areas and I think maybe I'll clock out early and get paid, though I'm not expecting the full amount. The boss doesn't pay, however (I

ODD JOBS

A few of our favourite work sims



LAWN MOWING SIMULATOR

Cut grass. That's really about it. But the mowers are cool, and the chore becomes a lot of fun.



EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2

There's something about hours of trucking while listening to the radio that's really serene.



FARMING SIMULATOR

If you think farming isn't exciting, think again. Harvesting beets is a thrill. I'm not being sarcastic.



ELITE DANGEROUS

If you think about it, it's just trucking in space. And everything is better in space.

» assume you have to finish the entire shift) and, well, some punches are thrown. I'll be honest, I started the fight. The boss, however, finishes it, punching me to death on the very boardwalk I'd just partially cleaned.

MINE, NOT YOURS

After recovering, I head back to Annesburg to try my hand at another job: miner. There's nothing more glamorous than hitting a wall with a pickaxe until a piece of it comes off, and that's just what I do. For a while. This time it isn't boredom or restlessness that causes my shift to end early, it's all the boxes of explosives the miners have left scattered around. Considering I'd been playing *RDR2* for an hour at this point and hadn't so much as drawn my six-shooter, those explosive crates grew more and more tempting. After mining my third node, I couldn't resist. I figure I'll quickly blow up a box and then finish my shift.

It doesn't quite work out that way. The box blows up beautifully, but the explosion kills a couple miners and all the miners it didn't kill start running around, ready to snitch. I don't get it, frankly. The fewer miners there are, the more mining there is for the rest of us, right? Well, the mining company, and in fact the entire town doesn't see it that way. My wages, if I ever get to collect any, are going to be spent on my bounty, which reaches into the hundreds of dollars after the ensuing gunfight.

Annesburg wasn't the place for me. I take a stagecoach to the muddy town of Valentine, where nothing bad has ever happened to me. There I visit the bar and ask for a job. While I'd hoped to be mixing cocktails and thoughtfully wiping glasses while drunk cowboys told me their stories, instead I'm dispatched to clean some tables. And I actually enjoy that! If there's a customer sitting at a table they say a little something while I scrub, and nothing explodes for my entire shift. A job well done, and the bartender actually pays me.

I spend my wages on a hotel room, and in the morning I take a delivery job, which instructs me to take a crook from the Valentine sheriff's office to the lawmen in Rhodes. The bounty is already tied up, so I throw him on the back of my horse and set off, ignoring the minimap which is giving my directions back to Annesburg because there are still boardwalks to scrub

and coal to mine. The ride, surprisingly, is uneventful, except for the very end. I accidentally knock a Rhodes resident over with my horse, he drags me into the mud, and we scuffle. I kill him with a head butt. But then I deliver the bounty and get paid. Only a single death! I think I'm getting the hang of this job thing.

OPEN ROAD

There's no more jobs in Rhodes, so I head to the big city, St Denis. There's a shepherding job available, though I'm a little dismayed to see it wants me to drive a herd of sheep over to Valentine, which I just left. Still, work is work. I hop on my horse and the sheep follow me out of town, except for the one I accidentally trample to death. I'm a little nervous leading sheep through the bayou, which if memory serves is absolutely filled with alligators. But the threat instead comes from a fellow traveller, who rides his wagon right over one of my sheep. That's two down. But the real issue is that the rest of the sheep, having seen their brethren crushed to death, stop following. I shout, I fire in the air, but nothing can bring them back in line. They spread out into their new habitat. They are now swamp sheep. I wish them godspeed and hope the gators accept them.

I return to St Denis, this time into a much classier bar than the one in Valentine, though the table scrubbing is just as enjoyable, and the clientele

is much fancier. In the midst of cleaning tables, however, a fight breaks out. Part of my bartending duties include breaking up brawls, so I wade in and start swinging. Issue is, part of the police's duties are also to break up fights, and at some point my wild fists connect with a cop's face. I surrender and spend the night in jail. I think only two people died, so that's not a completely unsuccessful shift.



I HOP ON MY HORSE AND THE SHEEP FOLLOW ME OUT OF TOWN

In the morning I'm released and take another delivery job, this one going from St Denis to Valentine. This time I'm not carrying a bounty on my horse but driving a wagon. Sounds great to me! Then I see the wagon, which is actually a massive metal tank owned by the Cornwall Kerosene and Gas Company.

Ah, yes. Who better to deliver a giant explosive tank of combustible liquid than a guy whose CV includes deliberately blowing up a box of explosives at his last job? Knowing it's probably not going to end well, I hop in to the wagon. My minimap is filled with so many lines telling me I still need to return to Annesburg to complete mining or scrubbing, but at least the pips showing all the sheep I abandoned in the bayou have finally vanished. I flick the reins and smash directly into the small wagon parked right in front of me. Nothing explodes, and the wagon driver yells rather than trying to drag me to the ground and beat me to death.

I head out more cautiously. The streets are filled with pedestrians and cops. I accidentally ride down the streetcar tracks for a bit, but no train comes. I slowly, but surely, make my way out of St Denis. So far, this is going better than any job I've had since I scrubbed those tables.

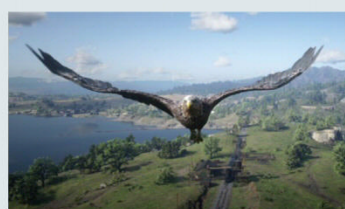
It doesn't last. As I'm winding my way across the map, I take the wagon across a covered bridge. As I near the end, two men jump out, pointing their guns at me. I can't stop in time. They shoot, killing one of the horses, effectively causing this job to fail like most of the rest. I return fire. The wagon explodes. Six people die, including me. I guess I'm just not cut out for honest work. ■

MOD SQUAD

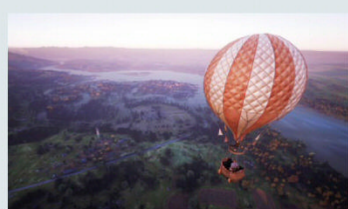
Other great singleplayer *RDR2* mods



CREATE YOUR OWN GANG
Screw Dutch. Run your own gang and do your own heists. Just like a real boss.



MODEL SWAP
Why play as a boring old human when you can be a bird, or wolf, or any other creature in the game?



HOT AIR BALLOON
Arthur Morgan doesn't spend enough time airborne. This mod lets you summon a balloon.



PIG RIDER
Horses are nice, but riding a pig through the Wild West? It's just a little bit better.



The sheep are following me like some kinda sheep.



ABOVE: Workplace conflicts should be handled in a healthy way.

BELOW: It's important to let off steam during the workday.





SURVIVE IN PROJECT ZOMBOID

Delay the inevitable by farming, stealing, and binge-watching TV. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

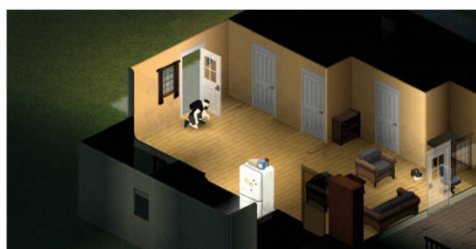
TIME
Ten hours

VITAL LINKS

Interactive map:
bit.ly/3GZSA98

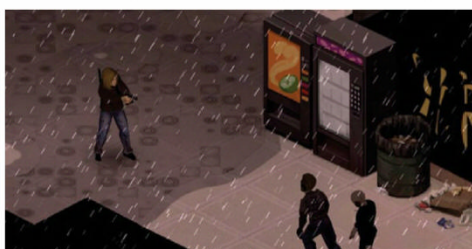
Helicopter event tips:
bit.ly/3nVGNkR

Car hotwiring guide:
bit.ly/3KEpCOv



SILENT NIGHT

1 Crouch as much as possible instead of walking, especially when you're exploring areas you haven't scoped out yet. It's still possible for zombies to discover you in this state, but you'll be much less audible as you take what you need from houses.



SHOOTING BLANKS

2 For the same, and rather obvious reason, steer clear from guns in almost all cases. A single shot will attract all the undead in the vicinity to your location, which isn't worth it even if you do land a killing blow. It's best just to run away in these situations.



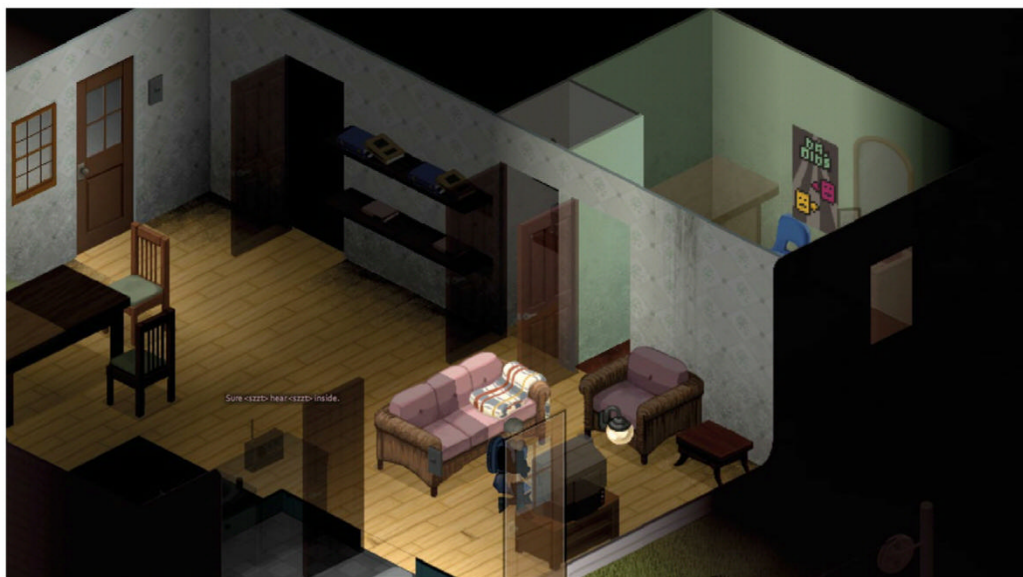
MASTER OF NONE

3 In terms of what you should pick up, find a good balance in your carried supplies. Rather than maxing out your carry weight with an impressive melee-based arsenal of weaponry, loot a mix of farming, medicinal, and carpentry gear to help you survive.



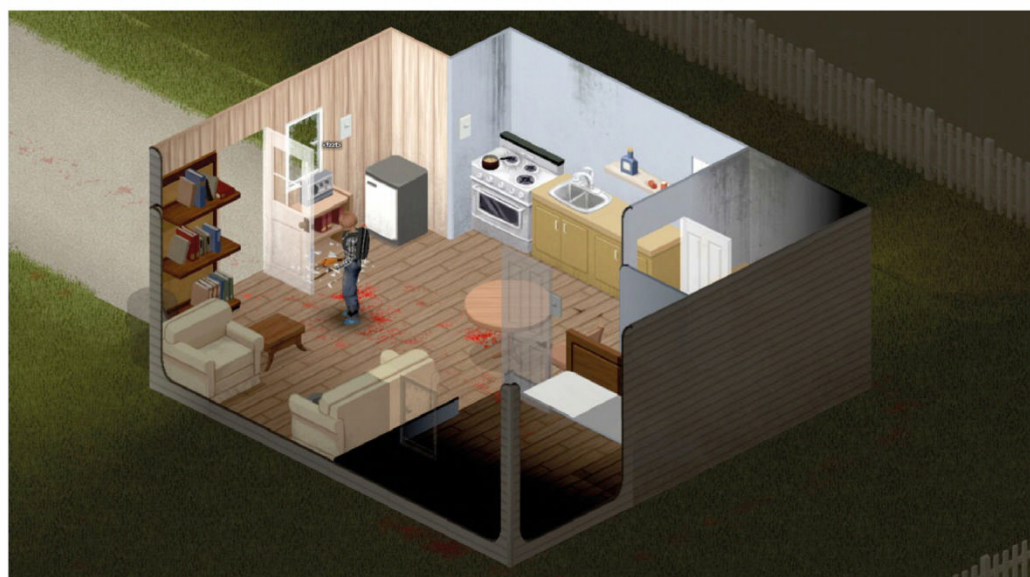
BAG MAN

4 If you're the indecisive type, look out for bags to increase your carry weight. Prioritise ones that you can carry on your back like a rucksack, though, because bags held in the hand will be dropped if you climb over something and then you'll have to pick it up again.



COUCH POTATO

5 In the days before the power goes out, watch as much TV as possible. Tune in to the Life and Living channel at 6am, 12pm, and 6pm to significantly boost your skills in cooking, carpentry, and survival, respectively.



WIRELESS WARNING

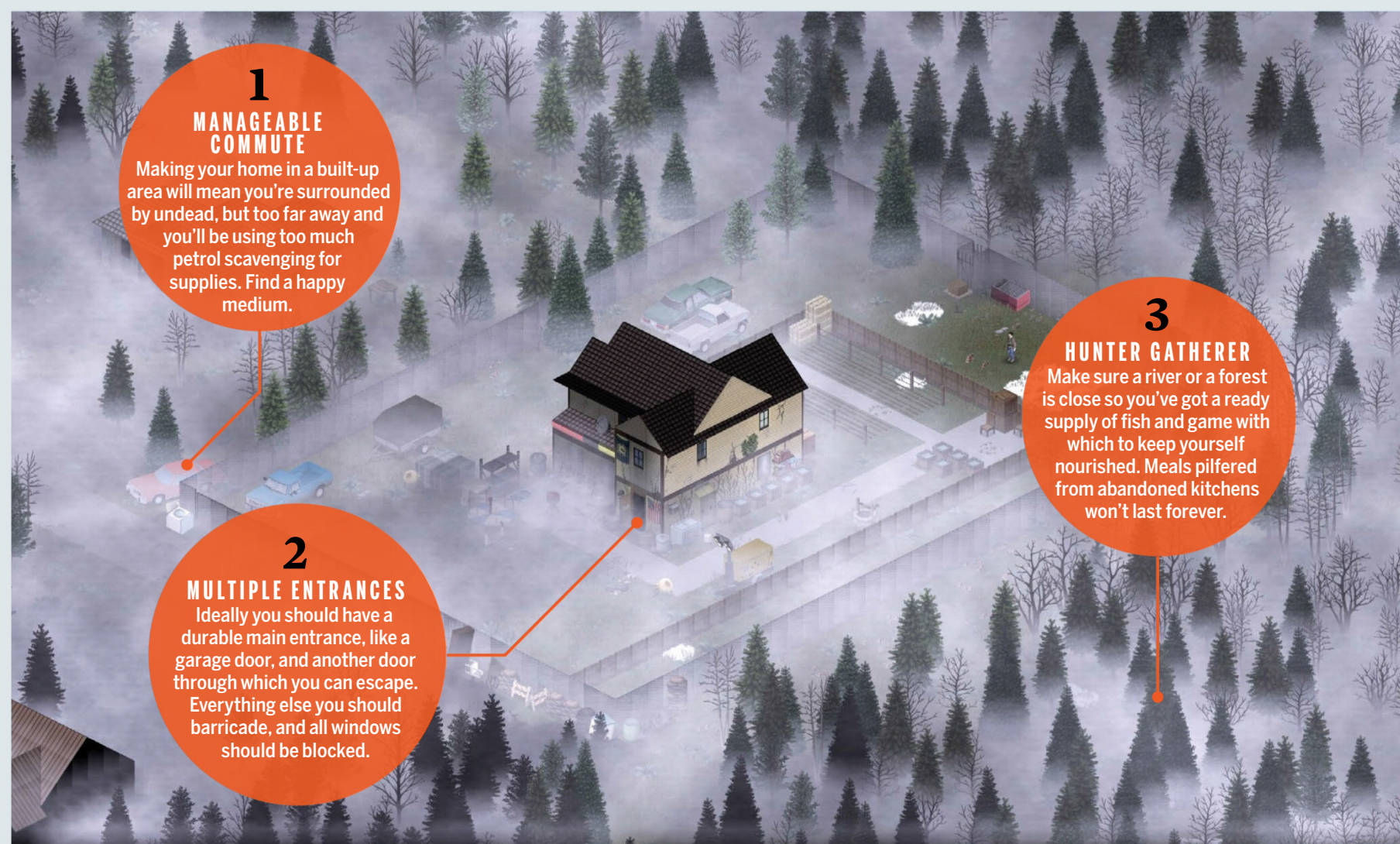
6 You should also listen to the radio at home and in vehicles. Listening to the weather will be useful as you tend to your crops, and emergency broadcasts will give you advance warning of the helicopter event.



BLADES OF GLORY

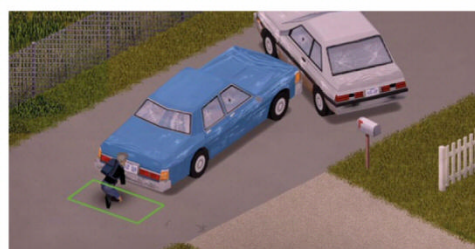
7 Once in your world a helicopter will appear overhead for a full day, and if it spots you, it'll chase you incessantly, its loud, whirring blades attracting many zombies to your location, and generally giving you a bad time. Avoid it by hiding inside or in a forest.

RESIDENCE EVIL *Tracking down the perfect zombie-proof base*



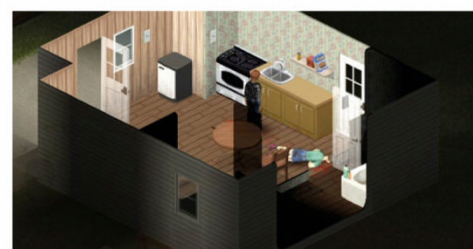
VIRTUAL ORIENTEERING

8 Use a map to mark the location of gear you've left and identify important points of interest, like medicine-filled hospitals. Left-click the bottom-right square for that or check the Vital Links section on the previous page for an interactive version.



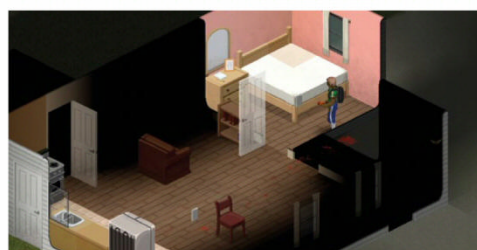
ROAD TRIP

9 The noise generated by driving a car is actually worth the risk: they function as portable storage as you reach further areas for scavenging. You can hotwire them yourself, but you should look in the glove box or on the floor around one for a key first.



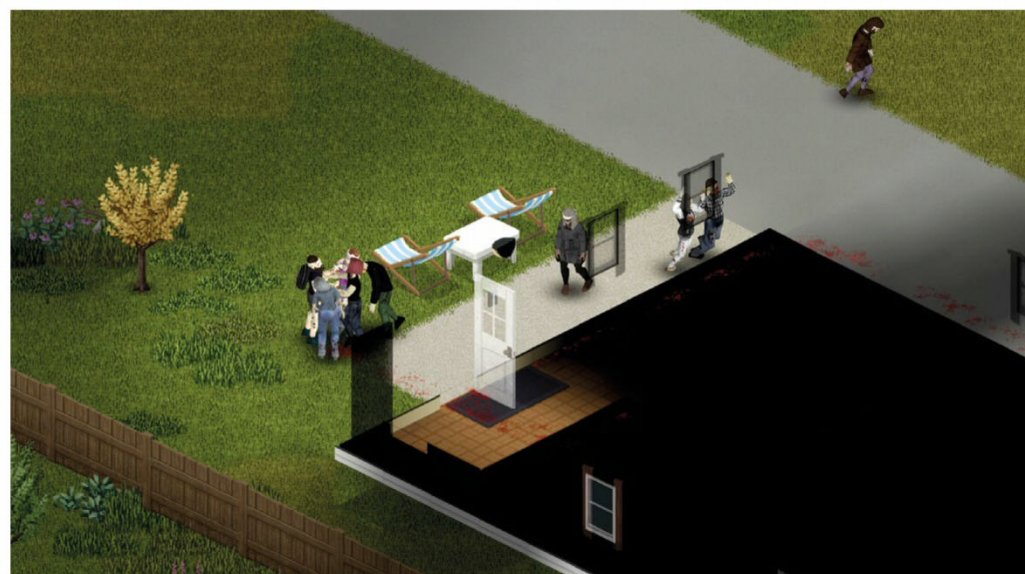
WATER WORLD

10 Collect as much water and as many receptacles for it as possible. Every bottle, bowl, mug, and can will help once the utilities get switched off. Craft Rain Collector Barrels with planks, nails, and bin bags for a more permanent solution. Keeping hydrated is vital.



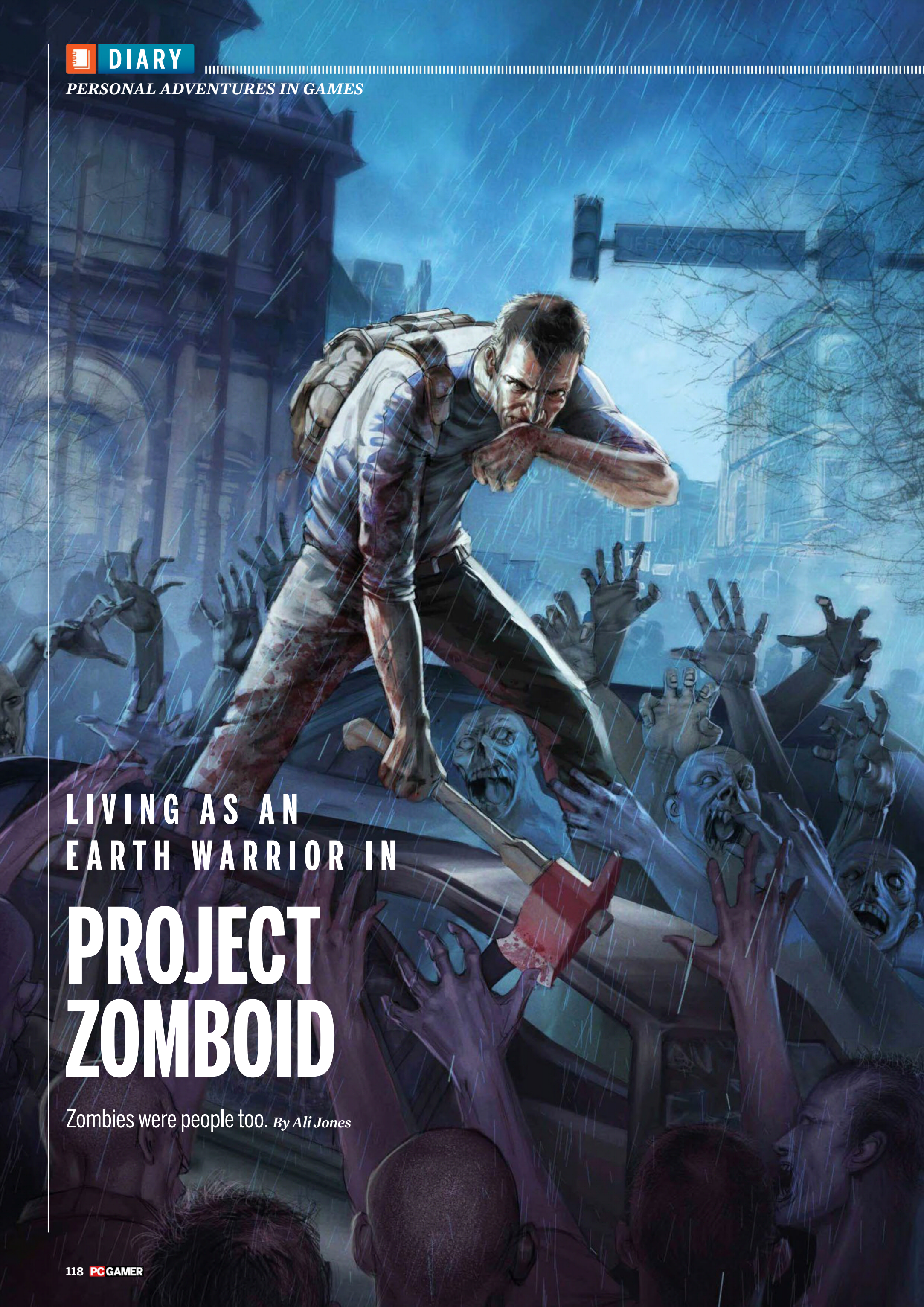
RIP AND TEAR

11 Stockpile nails and sheets. Nails are used in many carpentry recipes and increase weapon damage, but sheets can block your base's windows and be ripped into bandages to stop you bleeding after taking damage. Just make sure to change them before they get dirty.



PREPARE TO DIE

12 Death is inevitable in *Project Zomboid*. Don't view it as a failure, but try to enjoy your final moments. And if you're making a new character in the same world, leave your gear somewhere it can be easily regained.

The background of the page is a detailed illustration for the game Project Zomboid. It depicts a male survivor with a backpack and blood on his arms, crouching on a ledge in a city street during a heavy rain. He is looking down at a large, desperate crowd of zombies below him, many of whom have their hands raised. The scene is dark and atmospheric, with rain streaks visible across the entire image.

LIVING AS AN EARTH WARRIOR IN PROJECT ZOMBOID

Zombies were people too. *By Ali Jones*

Every time *Project Zomboid* loads up, it tells you, with grim certainty, that this is a game about how you died. For most, that death will likely come at the hands of one of the thousands of zombies shambling across its version of Kentucky. For others, it might be starvation or illness – once all that canned food has run out, how long will it be until you take a gamble on a mushroom or an uncooked rat?

But what if it didn't have to be that way? What if you could not only survive, but thrive, forsaking the leftovers of the families lost to the apocalypse and growing your own food in its place? What if the undead simply need to be left to their own devices, to live and let (un)live? If nothing else, the apocalypse offers a chance to start over, and to help the world be cleansed of the mess that humanity has made of it.

To take the best possible advantage of this fresh start, I create a character capable of living up to my new ideals. The result, Leaf, comes with a proficiency in farming and foraging to help him live off the fat of the land. To make up for the positive traits I've taken, I have to choose some negatives too; I cheat slightly, taking the Pacifist trait which makes me weaker in combat, and the Sunday Driver trait, which makes me drive very slowly, and which might prove tricky if I ever planned to get in a car or fight a zombie. I round things out with Claustrophobia, which makes me nervous if I go inside. Since I'm planning a life in the great outdoors, however, I don't see that being a problem.

Leaf starts life in the well-to-do town of Riverside. Things get off to a good start as I find an entire eggplant in the fridge, but get worse very quickly, as my claustrophobia is much more serious than I imagined. Within seconds I am a quivering wreck. I grab a jar of peanut butter to calm me down and aim to get out of town as quickly as possible. In doing so I get my first meeting with the undead, passing a zombie-ridden farm shop that might have been perfect for my clean-eating lifestyle if I didn't have to fight my way to the front door.

Leaving Riverside, I eventually make it to the countryside. It's not long until I spot a farmhouse. It's a perfect spot – surrounded by woodland on three sides,

with plenty of space for farming, and even a barn to store tools. Inside, there's plenty of room, and even some food still in the freezer. Unfortunately, I am still too nervous to remain indoors for any length of time, so I forgo the beds upstairs and instead spend my first night on the concrete floor of the open barn.

WILD CAMPING

I wake up feeling more tired than when I went to sleep, but I have lots of work to do. As the morning progresses I dig some furrows in the field, but soon remember that I don't have any seeds to plant in them. I set off in search, but quickly become so tired that I need to take a

BY THE TIME I WAKE UP AGAIN, IT'S VERY DARK AND I'M UTTERLY LOST

nap in the woods. By the time I wake up again, it's very dark and I'm utterly lost.

This proves to be the start of a vicious downward spiral. If I'm lucky enough to find a house, I dash inside as quickly as I can, grab any food I can eat, and make a run for it. More often than not, I'm trailing a string of zombies behind me. My lack of sleep means that I'm usually forced to pass out for a power nap under a secluded bush, meaning I wake up even more exhausted than before. Being tired dulls my senses, and an opportunistic zombie soon attempts to take a chunk out of me.

It doesn't get its teeth in, but it does give me a nasty scratch. I bandage it up as best I can, but whether it's the blood loss, the lack of sleep, or a nascent zombie virus, my condition worsens. Soon, I can barely walk. A poorly thought-out attempt to hop a fence fails, and Leaf is torn apart by the zombies on his heels.

A NEW LEAF

Thankfully, *Project Zomboid* lets you continue your progress, albeit with a new character. Leaf's freshly-created son, Branch, appears fully-formed in a bar on the far side of town. Branch shares his father's eco-friendly lifestyle, but I've done away with his claustrophobia. I leave the bar, taking a few beers with me – alcohol is definitely a natural product – and dash inside a nearby grocery store. Expecting to leave carrying a king's bounty, I'm instead met by shelves of rotting produce. Anything not in a fridge has gone off, meaning my need for seeds has grown. Branch is in luck, however, as the next shop is filled with useful supplies. Not food, this time, but clothes, tools, and, most importantly, seeds. I leave with bulging pockets.

The journey home isn't easy, but I eventually make it back to the farm. Branch is exhausted, but has unfortunately attracted the attention of a few zombies, who have followed him to the homestead. Were it not for my new lifestyle, I'd have dispatched

THE RULES

1. I can't use gas-guzzling cars

2. No meat, no dairy, and no canned food

3. No killing – zombies were people too



The all-seeing eye of the foraging system is a frequent companion.



» them one-by-one with the aid of the shovel I grabbed from the store, but that's not an option now. Despite my exhaustion, I'm forced to lead them away from the house before doubling back on myself and sneaking back to bed. The next few days pass in a blur of productivity. More furrows are dug. Seeds are sown, watered, and heaped with fertiliser. Furniture is disassembled and turned into barricades for unused doors and windows. But even with my home protected and my future food in the ground, it'll take two weeks for my first crop to come in. With each crucial trip back to Riverside for more food, I return to find that something else has gone wrong; during one trip, the water is cut off; during another, the electricity goes, removing my ability to cook or refrigerate food. Now, even when my crops come in, I'll have no way to keep them from rotting. With every journey, the cupboards full of canned goods become increasingly appealing. As it turned out, however, Branch wouldn't be tempted for long. After one successful trip, in which I find more seeds and extra fertiliser, I take a hubristic gamble on a couple of foraged field mushrooms. Heading to sleep with a pleasantly full stomach, my condition deteriorates rapidly. I woke up just in time to expire – with an unlikely spray of blood – on the floor of my bedroom.

(WOOD)CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK
So it was that Leaf's grandson, Log, came to be. Spawning even further away from the family home than Branch did, it takes almost a full day to get there, by which time I'm hungry, thirsty, and tired. Before I can attend to my needs, however, I must lay my father to rest. I take everything but his underwear off his corpse, and bury him in the chicken run. I wake up the next morning to rain. The torrential downpour drenches the soil, sating my thirsty plants. I jump into action, digging new furrows so that Log can sow the seeds that Branch discovered on his final expedition. Carrots and potatoes join my broccoli and impressive cabbage crop. I place all the receptacles I can find outside, littering the ground with buckets, cooking pans – even a lone mug – to retain as much water as possible. During the downpour, I notice my first crop has come in – I pull ten cabbages from the ground, and immediately begin feasting on them.



This is roughly where my cabbage-related excitement peaked.

ZOMB-ME

An apocalyptic earth warrior's most important personality traits

PACIFIST Having sworn off violence against zombies, a trait that limits your effectiveness with weaponry is a good way to earn bonuses.	INCONSPICUOUS If one false move can lead to an hours-long pursuit by a tenacious zombie, it pays to try and keep a low profile.	CLAUSTROPHOBIC You should be so keen to sleep under the stars that the thought of getting into a real bed should bring them out in a sweat.
HIKER A life on the trail helps make sure you can find some tasty food to eat wherever you are.	GARDENER Some extra farming stats are crucial when you're trying to maximise cabbage production.	SUNDAY DRIVER I never even touched a car, and this offered me a free skill point if I swore to drive safe.

To keep them fresh, my best option is to cook them. I make a campfire out of the remains of the furniture I took apart, but to light it I need a spark. I'm most likely to find matches or a lighter in Riverside, so with the rain cleared and my pockets full of cabbage, I head out. My decision not to kill zombies has always made these trips a little more dangerous, but up until now I've been able to stay safe (Leaf's misfortune notwithstanding). A closed door is usually enough to hold back even a pretty impressive crowd of the undead long enough for me to dash inside, collect some food and make a break for it before trying again at the next place. Now that I need specific items, however, I need to search the entire house rather than simply raiding the kitchen. It's soon clear that with zombies pounding on every door, there's no time to perform a thorough sweep of Riverside, so I give up and head off in another direction, hoping for somewhere a little more peaceful.

VEGETABLENNUI
It's a poor strategy. Any 'fresh' food I find is now rotten, and the few farmhouses I uncover are empty of any alternatives. I spend a night echoing Leaf, sleeping on the wooden floor of a run-down outbuilding. I discover a generator, which would have been the best way of keeping my crops fresh were it not just as reliant on petrol as the cars I've sworn not to use, or if I knew enough about electricity to plug it into my house. I stay alive, mostly thanks to the cabbages that I collected before I left, but those are making Log very unhappy, so it's a mixed blessing when I return home – largely empty-handed – to find half my crop has rotted in the ground, but the other half has borne dozens more seeds.

It's clear I have enough cruciferous vegetables to keep me alive for a long time, but it's around this point where I start to wonder

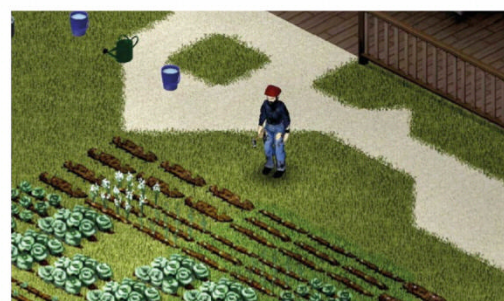
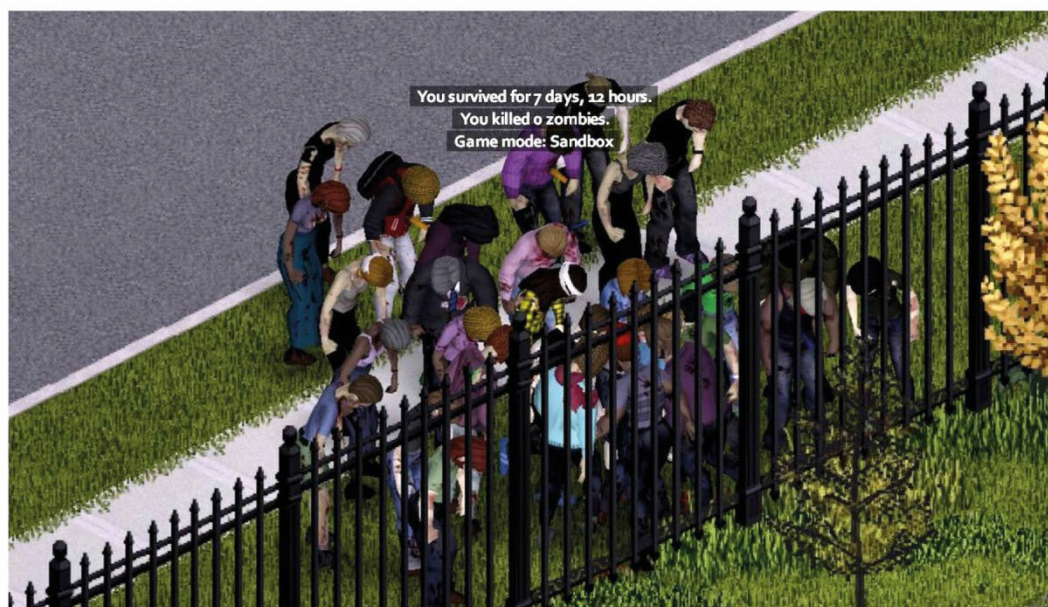


I STAY ALIVE, MOSTLY THANKS TO THE CABBAGES THAT I COLLECTED BEFORE I LEFT

whether this life is even worth living. If I step away from my homestead, I spend half my time foraging for mushrooms that might kill me or insects that my moral code forbids me from eating. The other half is spent acting like some grim Pied Piper, leading a trail of zombies back and forth across fields or down side streets, just so I can try and loot some forgotten shed. If I stay at home to tend to my crops – which I remain somewhat proud of – I'll be forced to plant ever-expanding fields of cabbage, a

foodstuff which I can barely consume as quickly as I am now growing it, and which Log has come to hate so much that the game tells me it's making him suicidal.

If I'm not scoffing down raw vegetables, I'm dismantling my house from the inside until I'm tired enough to crawl into the only surviving piece of furniture, only to awake the next morning to a hearty breakfast of another whole cabbage. The cycle will continue until I'm mauled by an opportunistic undead, I accidentally gnaw on some poisonous plant matter, or most likely, I run out of drinking water and succumb to a waterborne parasite from drinking untreated river water. *Project Zomboid* makes it clear that there's no real way to survive this particular apocalypse, but what it didn't make so clear was that Log would have died long before his heart stopped beating. ■



FAR LEFT: Leaf's greatest enemy – the wrought-iron fence.

LEFT: Trails like this would become very familiar.

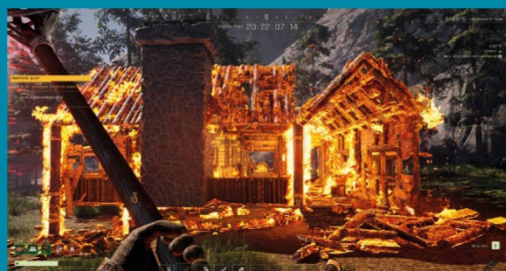
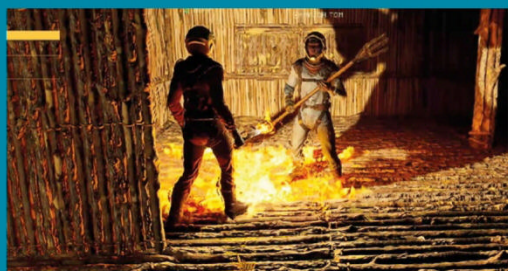


WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

ICARUS' BEAUTIFULLY DESTRUCTIVE FIRES

A bright spot of chaos in my crafty travels. *By Lauren Morton*



LEFT: The fire whacker won't save this one.



After a tense night hunting wolves in the pitch dark forests of *Icarus*, a friend and I trek back to our small but sturdy wooden cabin. The dull orange glow of our campfire in the distance is our target, growing steadily larger as we get closer. It grows too large. That's not a campfire. "Is that our home base?" my friend asks. "Our home base is on fire!" We sprint there, finding our third friend casually chopping trees not even 50 feet away, totally unaware of the conflagration behind him. We do our best to smack the flames off the walls with the fire whackers we'd crafted. In the end, it's too late. Flames spread to every one of the walls we've built, and our wooden base burns to the ground. Again.

My favourite part of exploring a new survival game is finding out just how reactive its world is. *Icarus* has dangerous wildlife, the constant threat of starvation, oxygen deprivation, and more, but what brings me the most joy is the ever present threat of accidental arson.

The first clue that fire would be my group's main nemesis in *Icarus* came on our very first night. With no bedrolls to sleep in, we took our newly crafted axes into the forest to cut trees by torchlight. Without the ability to dual-wield tools, we chucked our torches on the ground while we chopped. That's when we found out that standing on top of a torch would set us on fire – and that running for the nearest body of water would put us out.

After collecting wood all night and building our first tiny, thatch shack

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
December 3, 2021

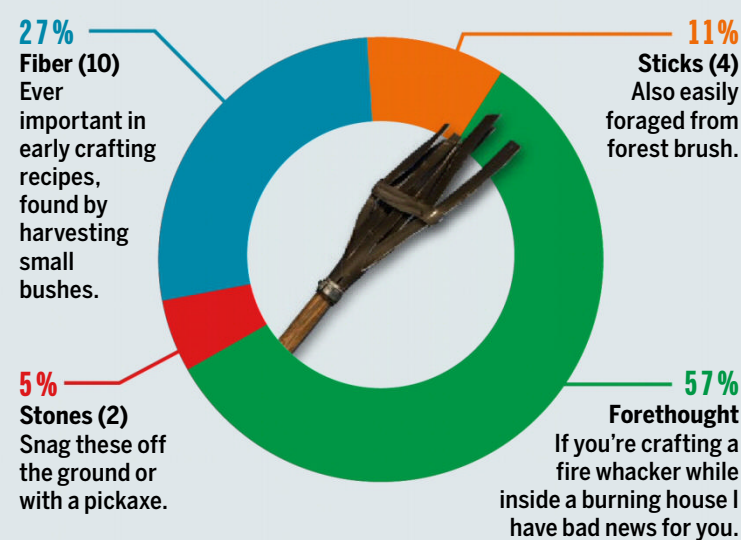
DEVELOPER
RocketWerkz

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
surviveicarus.com

GET WHACKIN'

Fire whacker crafting guide



the following day, we spent our second night huddled inside our home. Without bedrolls to pass the night in, we spent the dark hours goofing around inside our little hut. We huddled in its corners, squeezed between our first wooden chest and a tiny oxidiser. We found out, as our tiny home turned to cinders at our feet, that holding a torch too close to a thatch wall also starts a fire.

We diligently made every single fire-related mistake at least once. We

WE DILIGENTLY MADE EVERY SINGLE FIRE-RELATED MISTAKE AT LEAST ONCE

built a floor torch too close to an interior wall, which nearly cost us another base. We gestured at one another with torches in hand, catching one another on fire and sprinting in a circle around the inside of another base, tracking fire behind us with every footstep. We built a campfire inside the floor, somehow.

When initially perusing *Icarus*' tech tree, we spotted the rake-looking

device called a fire whacker. We laughed, believing it to be a frivolous specialty tool. After our third encounter with fire, we maintained a strict one fire whacker per prospector policy. Just in case.

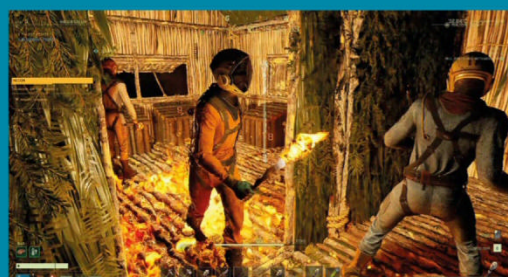
BLAZING SQUAD

All that property damage might have been more discouraging if I weren't playing online with three friends all willing to laugh over every unlikely mistake we've made – and if *Icarus*' fires weren't so beautiful.

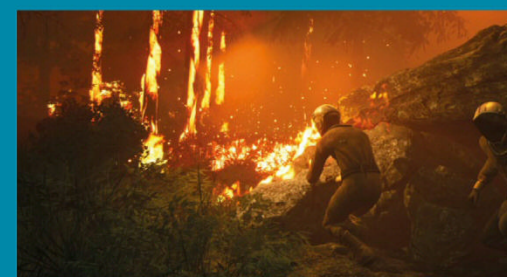
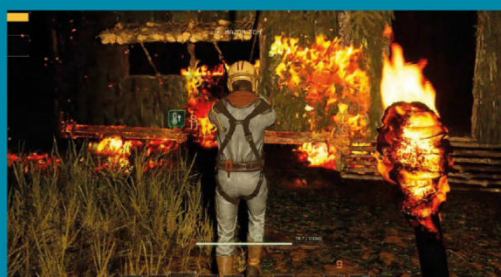
They start small. A single torch placed too close to a wooden structure will kick things off. One section of floor or wall begins with a small flame on its surface, eventually turning glowing orange, pulsing like the last charcoal in a campfire. Fire spreads to adjacent building pieces, floors to walls to support beams until an entire structure is ablaze and glowing. Beams creak and crack, falling to the ground in flaming piles. It's a horrifying mess to be in the middle of – desperately slapping the floor with my fire whacker and knowing that I'm fighting a losing battle as my stamina is depleted while the fire keeps spreading. *Icarus* is an undeniably lovely-looking survival game, and its devastating fires might be its most beautiful.

Icarus doesn't contain itself to house fires. Lightning can be the catalyst too, striking forested areas and kicking off a chained conflagration even more frightening than a cabin fire. Trees catch their neighbours on fire, and the spread is a thing of awe. I've watched them from the safety of a cliff above, standing in the drizzle at the end of a storm while a fire rages on for hours.

Rarely do I get so much enjoyment out of something that routinely ruins my day, but *Icarus*' fires are an exception – whether by self-inflicted arson or punishment from Mother Nature. They're just the right amount of chaos in a genre all about control. ■



LEFT: The arson was coming from inside the house.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



You don't get to the cult classic status without being good as hell

Don't look so
glum, chum.



TITANFALL 2

An old mech finds new life with a fan-run revival. *By Nat Clayton*

There are rare few games done dirtier than *Titanfall 2*. Sequel to a risky new IP, doomed by a release sandwiched between *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*, usurped by its own battle royale spin-off, and nigh-unplayable for the last year thanks to an absurd conspiracy of hackers and DDoS attacks, *Titanfall 2* was perhaps always destined to be a cult classic.

Of course, you don't get to the cult classic status without being good as hell. And on revisiting Respawn's 2016 mech-n-parkour-'em-up over the winter break, I was reminded just how joyous it is to slide, grapple and wall-run across *Titanfall 2*'s battlefields.

See, when Respawn debuted with the first *Titanfall*'s wall-running

soldiers, it tore up the FPS rulebook. The first game might not have set sales records, but when even *Call of Duty* is nicking your far-future acrobatics, you can confidently say you've made your mark.

Titanfall 2 rightfully built on that foundation with even more expressive movement. Pilots could now skid around with the king of videogame buttslides, maintaining momentum with grappling hooks and pumping their muscles full of goeey green adrenaline. It still takes a bit of work to get yourself going, but once you're in full stride you can clear entire arenas in seconds. It is absolutely joyous.

But *Titanfall 2* made one other massive change over its predecessor – and I reckon I'm about to out myself as some kind of miserable contrarian when I reveal where I land on the sequel's much-lauded

campaign. Look. *Titanfall 2*'s campaign is fine. Hell, by the standards of FPS campaigns of the time, it's great. But that feels more representative of where FPS stories were at the time than anything particularly special to the game itself.

GLAMPAIGN

Don't get me wrong, *Titanfall 2*'s story also does have some killer stand-out setpieces. Everyone remembers 'press F to time-travel', but the Ikea hell-factory and ship-to-ship wall-rides deserve equal shoutouts. The environments are gorgeous, with lush sci-fi skyboxes that rival even Bungie's backdrops, and beating the campaign only takes a around six to eight hours.

But for every time-jumping skirmish you have a slog through the jungle, or another truly lacklustre boss fight against a cast of villains that never quite match up as worthy opponents. While the first game's



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2016

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

DEVELOPER
Respawn Entertainment

LINK
bit.ly/3fTOFka



» tone was firmly *Call of Duty* by way of District 9, *Titanfall 2* attempts to be more colourful and characterful, giving you an Iron Giant-esque companion and a whole cast of anime villains to square up against.

But those baddies have a real case of Boba Fett syndrome – fan favourites with cool designs who ultimately get maybe a minute or two of actual screentime before being inelegantly killed off by Rifleman Jack Cooper, the most boring man who ever lived.

Here's the thing, for me, the first game might not have had a singleplayer campaign, but it was trying some wildly interesting stuff when it came to telling story through multiplayer. A playlist of missions ran you through a fairly rote sci-fi story, experiencing a war from both sides. You'd be introduced to the stakes of a match through short first-person vignettes, and maps would shift as they developed, skies exploding as fleets warped in and orbital cannons blasting carriers out of orbit.

Listen, *Titanfall* wasn't winning any Hugo awards with its writing. But it felt bold and experimental, a precursor to the kinds of seasonal storytelling that would define later live-service games like *Fortnite* or Respawn's own *Apex Legends*. *Titanfall 2* is ultimately a fine singleplayer story – but it rarely surprises and doesn't give its smartest ideas time to breath. Besides, it's in multiplayer where the wall-running sequel really gets to stretch its legs.

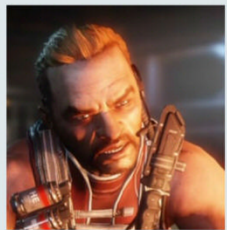
FALL AND RISE

When I reinstalled *Titanfall 2* at the start of December, it was widely considered unplayable online. The rampant server attacks that have plagued *Titanfall* for years now batter its sequel, with attacks even briefly spilling over to *Apex* last year.

Fortunately, *Titanfall 2* got an early Christmas present from its most die-hard fans. In mid-December a modded server browser dubbed Northstar appeared, letting players circumvent matchmaking to connect directly to player-run servers. The idea being that while a centralised matchmaking server is prone to DDoS attacks, custom server owners can simply spin up new games on the fly.

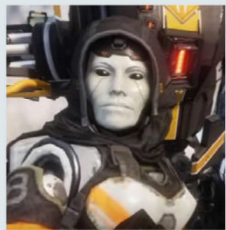
ROGUE'S GALLERY

If Sloane had a personality, she'd make this boxout



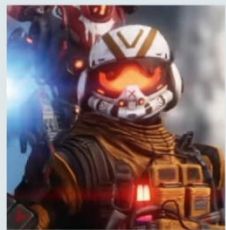
BLISK

Big, bad, and sounds exactly like your dad. Blisk has the honour of being the only Apex Predator not to get mulched by BT-7274.



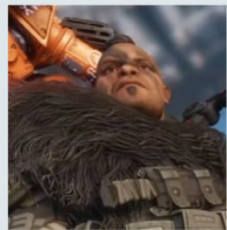
ASH

Being a robot and all, this heartless simulacrum survives her untimely murder, rebuilt and ready to enter *Apex Legends* five years later.



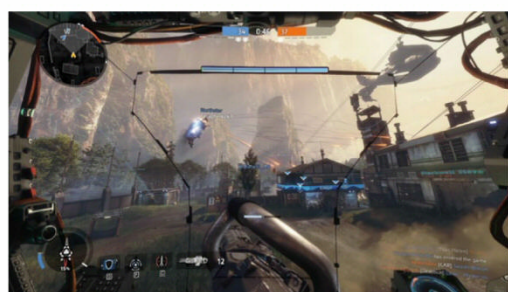
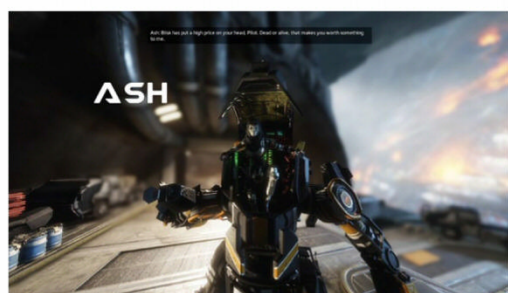
VIPER

Everyone loves Viper, the cool collected flying ace who gets unceremoniously shotgunned in the face five minutes after his arrival.



RICHTER

Had to look up his name to remind myself he isn't just an Arnold Schwarzenegger clone. Enjoys collecting ears.

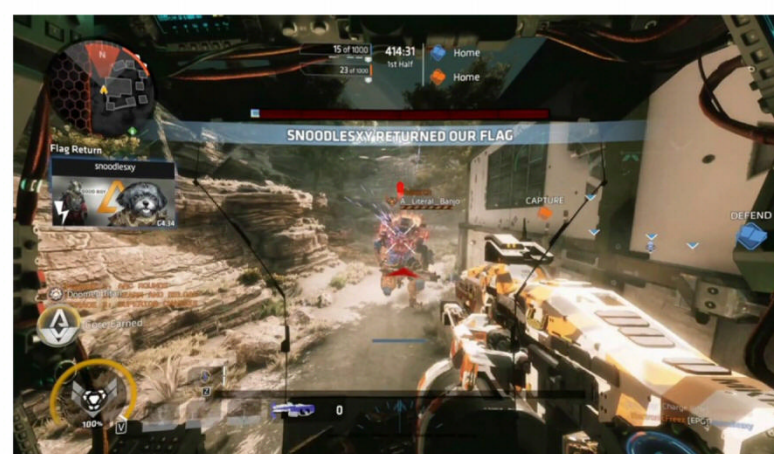
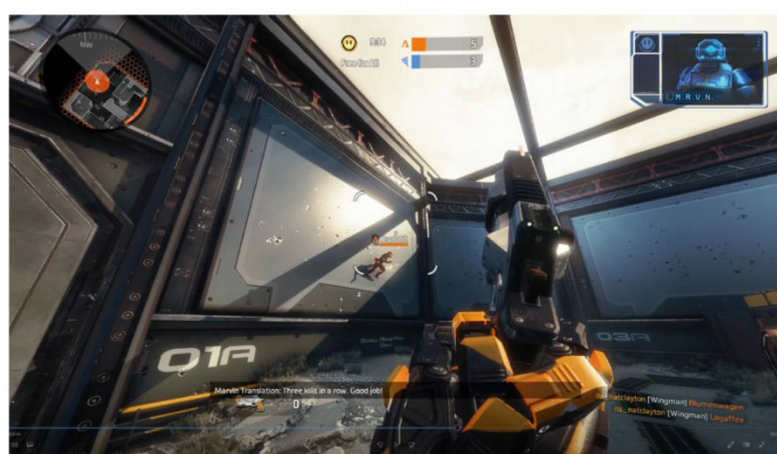


TOP: I'm about to turn Ash into ashes.

ABOVE: Cor, that's some view.

RIGHT: Wall-running vs Wingman: which comes out on top?

FAR RIGHT: Sometimes you just have to tackle a problem head-on.



Titanfall 2 is maybe the only game in recent memory to make the jump from matchmaking to a classic server browser – and not only has it saved the game's online community, but it's fundamentally changed how *Titanfall 2* is even played.

Server browsers have always offered communities within communities, with each server offering its own unique twist on the main game. Think about *Team Fortress 2*, which spawned achievement-farming idle servers, randomised weapon mods, and notoriously never-ending games of CTF on 2Fort on top of your usual 'vanilla' servers.

Titanfall hasn't gotten quite so crazy just yet, but that spirit of weird and wonderful micro-communities is out in full force. There are servers to play standard Pilot vs Pilot and Skirmish, sure. But some servers will crank up air acceleration to 9,000% to give you outrageous manoeuvrability, while others will give pilots the option to carry around outlandish, oversized Titan weapons.

At time of writing, standout modes like Attrition and Bounty Hunt don't work (Northstar's developers haven't been able to crack AI and pathfinding). But in their

IT'S FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED HOW TITANFALL 2 IS EVEN PLAYED

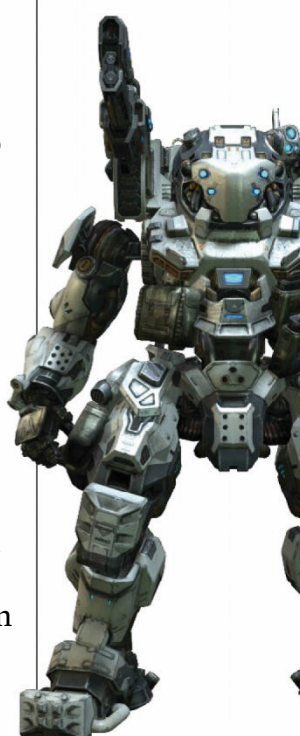
place the community has spun up brand new modes. Genre classics like Gun Game and Infection join the ammunition-scarce One In The Chamber. But the real star is the absurd spectacle of Fastball.

Fastball sports what may be the coolest introduction to any multiplayer match, ever, with each round beginning with campaign big boy BT-7274 yeeting your player into the arena. Both teams then scramble to eliminate each other, with teammates only respawning if you can clutch one of three hackable panels placed in the map. It is fast, it is chaotic, it is brutal, and it is everything I adore about *Titanfall 2*.

UPGRADE CORE

All of this, and Northstar is still only in its first month or two of existence. There's no telling how the modding community will reshape *Titanfall 2* in the coming months or years.

Getting AI working won't just let Northstar resurrect Attrition, but



create entirely new modes with a toolkit of grunts and robots and auto-piloted Titans. Custom skins are already everywhere, but what about custom player models or entirely new maps? What happens when your traditional rounds of Pilot vs Pilot on Angel City are nestled next to servers dumping anime-flavoured Titan models onto a painstaking recreation of *Counter-Strike's* Dust2,

I've a strong sense that, as time goes on, *Titanfall 2* will become unrecognisable. But, it's an important step for preservation. Live games, more than any other, are at great risk of being lost to history as soon as they're no longer profitable. Whether through lack of will or resources, Respawn has been unable to support its cult shooter, and as a centralised online game the lights were always going to go out eventually.

But in taking over control of the game's future, Northstar has ensured that people will be able to play one of the past decade's best shooters for years, maybe even decades to come. Circumstance might well have doomed *Titanfall 2* to obscurity over the past five years. But thanks to Northstar, modders have ensured that this phenomenal shooter has a strong future. ■

IMOGEN MELLOR



As the newest addition to PCG, I feel like I have something to prove with my recommendations. I'll let you decide whether I proved it.



WHEATLEY GOOD

PORTAL 2

thinkwithportals.com

→ *Portal 2* is my all-time favourite game. I credit it as what fired up my passion for the medium, and ten years later it's still holds up as one of the best puzzle games ever made. Everything about Valve's creation is seared right into my brain – 'thinking with portals' is an understatement.



ON THE CASE

DISCO ELYSIUM

discoelysium.com

→ *Disco Elysium* is a very close second in my personal rankings. From the incredible voice work added with the *Final Cut* update, to the environment, to the puzzling mysteries, this is as close to a perfect RPG as we've seen. Bonus points for Kim's incredible jacket.



POT LUCK

GETTING OVER IT WITH BENNETT FODDY

foddy.net/2017/09/getting-over-it

→ Something about *Getting Over It* just speaks to me. Probably the literal voice of the titular Bennett Foddy, as he goads me for my latest fall and the hours of lost progress it represents. Delicious, unbearable frustration in game form.



SPACED OUT

OUTER WILDS

mobiusdigitalgames.com

→ *Outer Wilds* makes you watch the universe end every 20 minutes. But it's not scary – it's peaceful. You hop into the abyss knowing that your next 20 minutes will be better. You'll know more. You'll do more. And eventually, maybe, you'll figure out how to make it last this time.

MUST



PLAY

**A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW**

by Imogen Mellor



THREE AGENT

HITMAN 3

hitman.com

→ *Hitman 3* is a playground for those looking for anything from a nonsensical adventure to a serious covert mission. IOI crafts such beautiful and in-depth levels for you to explore, pure sandboxes for the flavour of chaos you enjoy most. And regular updates have kept it fresh.



FLYING COLOURS

LIFE IS STRANGE: TRUE COLORS

bit.ly/3H2g3qB

→ If you're like me and love a little bit of over-the-top cheesy dialogue, relationship drama, and some head-bopping bangers, *Life is Strange: True Colors* is for you. It was my comfort blanket game last year, giving me new friends, new enemies, and super powers.



GOOD LORD

DARK SOULS

en.bandainamcoent.eu/dark-souls

→ It's 2022 and I'm recommending *Dark Souls*. I hadn't finished it until recently so I'm still allowed to fawn over its incredible narrative, boss design, and intricate environment. I never thought I'd complete it, so if you're understandably hesitant, this is your sign to give it a go.



WASHED UP

POWERWASH SIMULATOR

bit.ly/3qJq5H3

→ Sometimes a girl just needs to sit back, relax, and powerwash. This entire game revolves around the satisfaction you get from seeing items go from disgustingly dirty to sparkling clean using the power of high pressure water. It sounds mundane, but it's magical.



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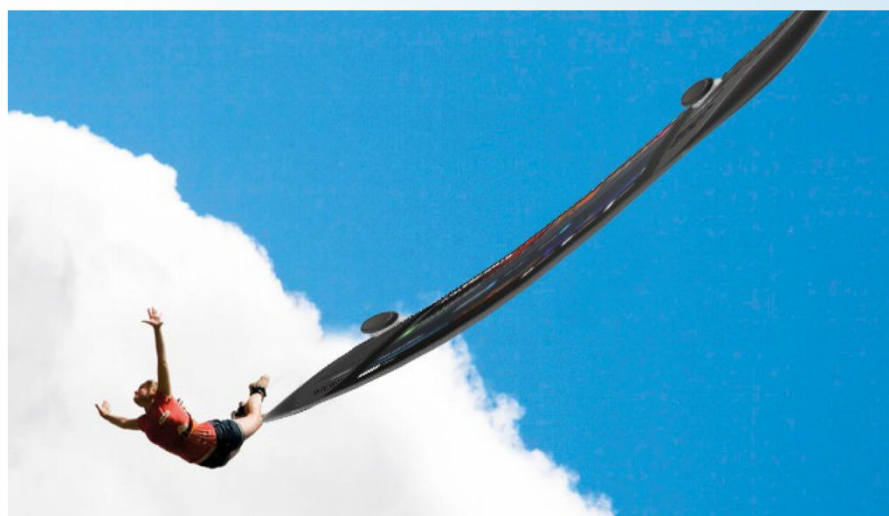
What's next for the Deck?

The Steam Deck is cool and all, but you know what would make it even cooler? Accessories! Check out our great ideas



Wheels

Turn your Steam Deck into a skateboard deck and make yourself more portable than ever! May void the warranty.



Bungee Cord

Perfect for *Elden Ring* players – every time you throw your Deck at the wall, it'll bounce back to your hand!



Hats

Honestly, how long is Valve going to be able to resist selling headgear for their hardware?



Portable Crowbar

A miniature tool that snaps onto your Deck! Perfect for prying open tiny crates, or killing ant-sized Antlions.



Games for Windows Live Emulator

Relive the magic of Microsoft's lost gaming platform! Come on Gabe, you know you loved it.



VR Conversion Kit

Strap the Steam Deck to your face for a cheap alternative to a VR headset! The perfect way to play *Half-Life: Alyx*.

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